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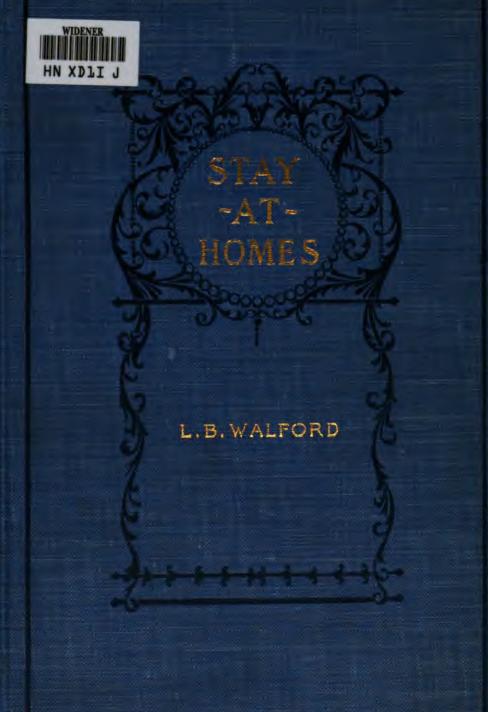
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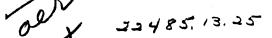
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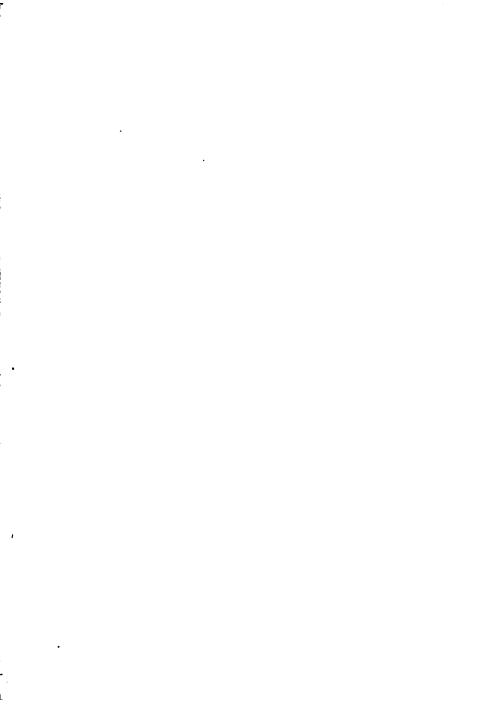
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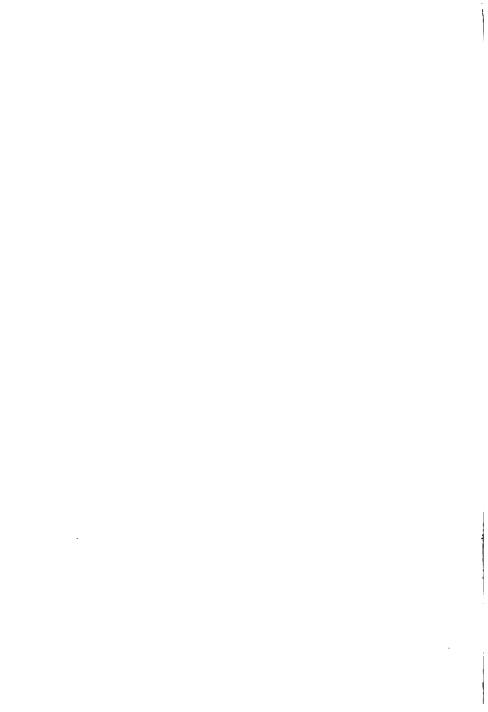
MRS. ELLEN HAVEN ROSS

OF BOSTON

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STAY-AT-HOMES

BY

L. B. WALFORD
AUTHOR OF "MR. SMITH," "THE BABY'S GRANDMOTHER," ETG.

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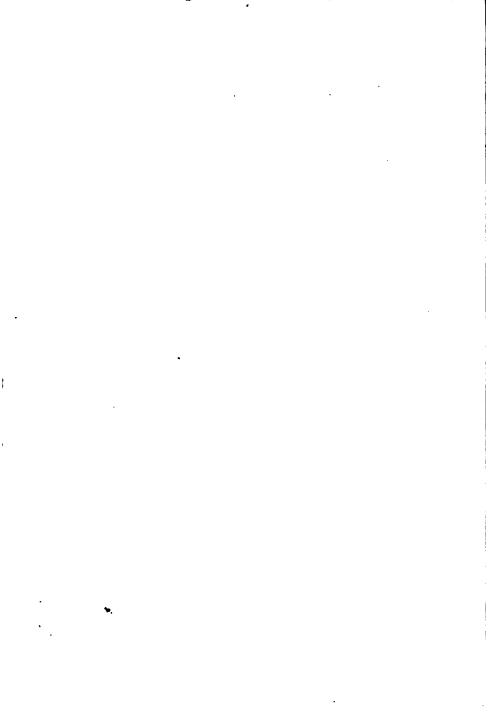
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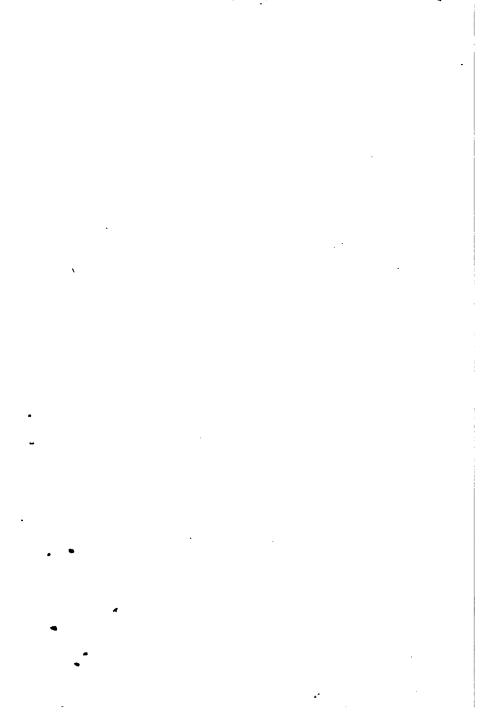
PUBLISHERS' NOTE.

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CHAPTER I.

THE ARRIVAL.

An old English country house, whatever may be its beauty of situation and stateliness of surroundings, is not seen to advantage on a wet day.

A wet day exhibits all its defects, emphasises all its weaknesses, may almost be said to rouse all the worst feelings of its nature.

When the sun shines, who notices that the large and lofty rooms, with their mullioned windows, are somewhat sombre, not to say gloomy in their far recesses—that the ceilings are dark, begrimed with the smoke of many a woody fire—that the heavily-framed pictures on the walls have gathered dust in every hidden niche—that carpets and curtains are faded—and that generally there is a lack of that brightness and smartness which characterises the modern dwelling of the same pretensions?

In the latter are to be found all sorts of appendages and conveniences which the old country house never dreamed of when it was reared, and whose absence the younger members of the family, who go about and contrast their house with those of their friends, are pretty sure to note and deplore—on a wet day.

Then, it is lonely, having so much ground of its own on every side; for nowadays, when every inch of land is valuable, a spacious mansion is as often as not pitched by the roadside, with a few yards of drive in front and a few acres of shrubbery behind. Paterfamilias, who has to pay the bill, is not going to have a foot of soil more than is necessary for the erection of stables and farm-buildings—if, indeed, he goes the length of farm-buildings; and these are huddled together into the smallest possible space, while the whole domain is constructed barely out of earshot of the village, with a due regard to the proximity of station, church and post-office.

Our forefathers thought of none of these things. It was much if they thought of drainage and fresh air; it was a chance if the best chambers commanded the finest outlook or indeed possessed what is now termed "A view" at all; and as for rearing a gentleman's seat without a park, without a summer-ground, without encircling shades and alleys, the haunt of bird and beast from one generation to another, strange indeed would such a pettifogging economy have seemed in their eyes,—and this seclusion becomes on a sudden intolerable—on a wet day.

Long avenues, arched in by dripping boughs, are formidable barriers between the denizens of the old house thus far to seek, and the so-called neighbours, who at other times find them pleasant and easy to traverse. Even the short cuts—for, to be sure, there are short cuts, field-paths, and cart-ruts, by which, and by surmounting a stile or so, foot-passengers may wend their way easily enough in summer, or when a dry frost binds up the grassy slough—even these, however, are impassable on the typical wet day, and silence and solitude prevail on every side.

The dusk draws on; the rain continues to patter, patter, patter on roof and window-pane; the front-door bell never rings; the very servants seem loth to put a foot outside their own green-baized barricades—and if there be a spot on earth duller and drearier and more hopeless of any distraction or relief than the old English

country house at such a moment, its occupants, more particularly if they are young and lively, more especially still if they are of the feminine sex, do not believe it.

"I am sick of you, Kitty."

"You can't be more sick of me than I am of you," retorted Kitty. Then she turned what was, after all, a smiling, good-tempered face upon a sister who had not yet spoken, "And here is Beatrice sick of us both!"

Beatrice, however, was not to be drawn into the conversation.

"Hi! Can't you say you are?" cried the last speaker, who was round and chubby, and, even on a wet day, talkative. "What is the use of being cross about it? We didn't make the rain. You needn't look daggers at Gwen and me because you can't get out. Don't you suppose we want to get out, too? I had been going for a ride—"

"Go, then; or, at any rate, go somewhere else, and don't deafen us with your chatter——" suddenly the elder Miss Maynard roused herself and frowned impatiently, as she threw aside the book she had ceased to read, but still held in her hand. "Do go, for pity's sake. There are plenty of other rooms; why should you come to whimper here? Did you not hear Gwen say she was sick of you?"

"Oh, I heard; I heard, and felt quite amiable and reciprocal towards the kind utterer of such a sentence. It is not of her I complain, but of you who will never be sociably morose. You sit and gloom like a sphinx——"

"At least I don't annoy other people. Gwen," turning to her other sister, "did you hear when this creature, this companion-woman is to arrive? I suppose not before night?"

But before Gwendoline, who was caught in the middle of a yawn, could do more than shake her head, the irrepressible Kitty struck in, "Not before night! Don't you know? The carriage has gone for her now. She is to come by the five o'clock train, and mother gave orders——"

"I asked Gwen," said Beatrice, with cold irritation, "I did not ask a child like you, who learns things by listening and overhearing. Gwen, why don't you speak? I suppose something was said to you—as nothing was to me—and we could hardly both be left in the dark——"

"Just what you were—but I knew!" Triumph on Kitty's part. "And I knew that you didn't," further appended she; "and if you had asked me—but you are so high and mighty, you two—I could have told you all about it; for I was in mother's room when Mrs. Stead came in; and mother was fussing over the train book, and she said——"

"I don't wish to hear what she said."

"Oh, nonsense, Beatrice;" it was Gwendoline who here interposed, curiosity getting the better of her former impassive attitude. "What is the use?" muttered she, sotto voce, and shrugged her shoulders. She had long ago given up taking umbrage at trivialities, which, whether intentional or not, were still keenly felt by Lady Laura's eldest daughter. "Go on, Kitty, if there is anything to go on about. You had no business to be there, I daresay; but still, as you were there, you may as well——" and she laughed significantly.

"If you choose to learn through highways and byways what goes on in this house, I don't," said Beatrice, rising and leaving the room.

Beatrice Maynard was now twenty-six years of age, and, on her "Coming out" at eighteen, people had remarked what a great thing it would be for Lady Laura, who was such a nice person when you knew her, but who was a little difficult to know—and certainly shy and

apt to shrink from society—to have a grown-up daughter at last. The Maynards had lived so very quietly for so very many years—ever since they lived as "The Maynards" at all, in short—but we may give a single glance backwards to explain the situation.

Sir Henry Maynard had come into his inheritance while a boy, had married while yet a youth, and had settled down to live the life of a country gentleman immediately afterwards.

He had no ambitions; might almost be said to have no aspirations. It is true that he was by no means a bad husband, nor did he shrink from discharging such duties, both in the county and in the parish, as fell to his share, and were rendered obligatory by his position; but the fulfilment of them was easy, and for the rest he was in his own eyes accountable to nobody. He was his own master; he was at liberty to lead his own life; he was the one and only judge of his own actions—and as for the verdict of his fellow-creatures, his eyes would have bulged in their sockets had such an idea as that Sir Henry Maynard should take this into consideration, been suggested to him.

Lady Laura was equally indifferent; or perhaps it may be said obtuse.

She also was in her earliest youth when she accepted the first chance that offered of getting away from a dull home, where she was only one of countless daughters, and did not meet with the attention she considered her due. A great deal of attention was necessary to her ladyship's happiness; and though she had her good points, and could be won upon to exhibit them on occasion, a secret and overweening vanity, an intense, and by herself unsuspected, sense of her own importance, marred her character and soiled its best attributes.

The pair lived separate lives, interfering but little with

each other, and apparently content with each other—but on one point they differed; while the husband was never heard to complain of the wife, and indeed was careful to respect her comfort, sometimes even at the cost of his own, she on her part never entirely forgot that in marrying him she had assumed the cares of wedded life before the world had opened its arms to her as a girl, and that there had been no vast assumption of loverlike devotion and tenderness on his part to compensate for the loss of those bright years of free, joyous maidenhood which she was wont to fancy might have been hers, had she waited a little longer before taking upon herself the irrevocable vows.

Over this reflection Lady Laura often brooded, and the result was a curious one. As time passed she grew jealous; not of her husband—for Queen Eleanor herself could not have found food for the green-eyed monster in Sir Henry Maynard, whose first impulse at the sight of a woman was to shuffle out of her way—but of her daughters.

Of these there were three; the three already introduced to our readers; and, as one by one they emerged from the schoolroom, and friends and relations began to take notice of their appearance and manners, to inquire into their tastes, and civilly flatter the supposed fond mamma on the looks of one and the accomplishments of another—as the neighbourhood began to recognise the Misses Maynard as individuals to whom invitations could be issued and appeals made—their mother experienced not the usual sensations of pride and pleasure, but a vague sense of injury.

In her young days, she said, no one thought of asking girls out by themselves, nor dreamed of their joining societies and guilds independently of their parents. Why was this and that proposition not made to her-

self? She supposed it was the fashion for mothers to be laid on the shelf, but she was not quite so old and feeble ——

"You are not in the least old, or feeble," said Beatrice, calmly, "and you are perfectly able to join Mrs. Curle's work society, and have it meet here once a month; and Mrs. Curle and all the rest would be only too glad if you would; but you have never taken part in any of these things, mother, so naturally they don't ask you now."

"You speak as if I were a kind of outcast, Beatrice. Yet you know perfectly that my health would never have stood racketing about in all weathers to work-parties and tea-parties. Of course I should have liked as well as other people to take up charitable schemes and so forth—but I never could; and now Mrs. Curle, who is quite a new person in the neighbourhood, thrusts herself forward and asks you to join her! I do think it is ridiculous, almost impertinent."

"Mrs. Curle knows that you are an invalid; and as she found nothing of the sort in existence, nor likely to be in existence, when she came here, I suppose she thought she was at liberty to start it. I can't see, for my part, why she should not."

"At any rate, she need not have asked you. I am not saying anything against Mrs. Curle—she is a vulgar little woman, but I daresay she means well; all I do say is, that it is now continually 'Miss Maynard' from every one. 'Miss Maynard' is on half the notes on the hall table. You have twice the number of correspondents that I have; and considering that I am the mistress of this house, and have never brought up my daughters in the horribly knock-about fashion of the present day, I might expect them to have escaped some of its worst features."

Beatrice was silent, but she had an expressive countenance.

"I see what you think," pursued Lady Laura, annoyed both with herself and with her daughter, for she had the sense to perceive that she was betraying more than was desirable of a long-pent-up grievance, and wished even while she spoke that she could hold her tongue. "You think I am making a fuss because I feel myself slighted? It is not that in the least. No one cares less about their own importance than I do. I never assert myself; and it is just because I do not that people take advantage of it. Mrs. Curle would never have thought of writing to you, and leaving me entirely out of her note—except just 'Kind regards' at the end—if she had not felt that she could do so with impunity."

The above may serve as a specimen of many other conversations of its kind.

"Why am I always being asked now if my daughters are fond of music?—or if my daughters sketch?" Lady Laura would cry indignantly. She had been wont to play and sing with some credit in her youth, and still occasionally brought out her box of water-colours when summer came round. "Why does no one think of ever asking me? I suppose it is just possible that I can still care for some things? But the young people seem as if they must usurp everything nowadays."

It was Kitty who was most successful in beguiling her mother from these moods once they set in. Beatrice was too proud; in her own heart resented them too bitterly. Beatrice, with the sap of life running strong in her veins, with a thousand desires and aspirations teeming in her breast, and with rapidly forming convictions growing ever stronger within her busy brain, naturally fretted more than did the other two beneath this futile folly. It vexed and shamed her; she would

not argue with it. Neither would she condescend to soothe it to rest, as perhaps she could have done. Lady Laura was strong-willed and tyrannous, but she would not have been inaccessible to reason, and she was certainly open to flattery. "But you rub her up the wrong way," cried little Kitty, whom it cost nothing to be "nice," and who, moreover, contended that there was something to be said on her mother's side. "You wouldn't yourself like to be thought old and out of it before you were fifty," stoutly alleged she.

"I should not mind if I had lived my life, and done what I chose with it. Had mother chosen—be quiet, child, let me speak"-for Kitty was bursting in again, prepared to combat the idea of choice—"I say had mother chosen," persisted her sister, "she could have had everything different. Father gives in to her, as it is; but he would have given in a great deal more, if it had begun earlier. It is mother who has never cared to go anywhere, or do anything but stagnate down here from year's end to year's end—with the exception of a solemn visit or two, and a few weeks in London, so long ago that she has almost forgotten by now what London is like. Why did she never travel? Why did she never cultivate people? Why did she never do any one of the things that we want to do now, and that she tries to prevent our doing? Simply because she did not care to do them. She preferred to eat and drink, and drive, and lie on the sofa-"

"Beatrice, I do not think you—how can you say such things?"

"They are true." But Beatrice looked a trifle ashamed. After a minute's pause, she resumed: "I suppose I should not speak so, but it comes out before I can help it. The world seems to me full of strange and wonderful things, and I long to get at those things,

and I am so tied and bound and helpless——" she broke off abruptly. Kitty looked a little awed.

"Well, if you would speak to mother," she essayed after a pause, "I daresay something might come of it."

"No, nothing would. We should never understand each other. We have not a thing in common."

"Yes, you have."

"What?"

"You both like your own way," said Kitty, slyly, "and," added she, with her eyes still twinkling, "mother gets hers, and you mean to get yours—some day."

Gwendoline, the second of the sisters, neither resembled the elder nor the younger in character and disposition. She was the prettiest of the three, soft, fair, graceful and indolent. She had neither the fire of Beatrice nor the frolicsome spirits of Kitty; beneath restrictions and deprivations she was fretful if disappointed of a pleasure, but indifferent or even acquiescent otherwise. The mere fact that she and her sisters, three fully grown and developed young women, should be kept still in leading-strings, and powerless to break loose from them, irked her not at all,—but, as soon as her own desires were crossed, or an opportunity for exhibiting her charms forced to be surrendered at the bidding of the higher powers, she would complain more loudly than any one.

Gwen was much taken up with her own beauty; and the hours that Beatrice spent in reading, thinking, and struggling to obtain some outlets for her naturally fine abilities and energies, were frequently passed by her sister in trying new modes of dress and fashions of arranging the hair.

Whether Lady Laura commended these or animadverted on them depended very much on how Lady Laura was feeling at the moment. If tolerably well and brisk, she might be drawn into quite a little show of

interest and inquisitiveness. "Was that really the new style? Did not Gwen think something of the sort might suit herself?" Once she was induced, laughing, to submit her own faded locks to the handling of Gwen's deft fingers; and when her maid was called in, and instructed, and was sure she understood perfectly, and with a little practice would be able to please her ladyship—for indeed her ladyship's hair was never made the most of as now worn—Lady Laura was as pleasant as possible, and felt herself quite charmingly young and silly.

But she never could be on these terms with Beatrice. Not that Beatrice despised hairdressing and other femininities; it was only that she did not see what good they led to, she said. What avail was it to be smart and upto-date on such a very minute point as hair, or in the wear of a new sleeve or collarette, when in everything else she and her sisters lagged so hopelessly behind? There were such thousands of things she burned to do, to see, to take part in.

"One may as well get what one can," quoth Gwen, complacently viewing herself in the glass. "I shall strike awe into the breasts of the vicarage girls, anyway. They won't know that I only got this," holding up her head, with its cleverly inserted frame, over which her fair, wavy tresses were rolled back, "from a Bon Marché fashion plate."

"They have probably got a newer number of the Bon Marché paper than we have."

" Not they."

"Are we likely to have anything newer than other people?"

When Beatrice spoke in this tone, Gwen knew better than to argue the point. She disliked arguments at all times, and one with her sister was sure to leave a disagreeable feeling behind, especially when, as in the present instance, it related to themselves and their neighbours.

It was Gwen's theory that, whatever might be the status of the Maynards in the world at large, it was high in the little world at their feet. Beatrice, with a wider insight into human nature, smiled at this. To her it was a delusion.

"Don't you suppose they know? What is to hinder their knowing?" cried she. "The very Hoggits go in for a Hoggitty bit of the London season, staying with their married sister for it. And the whole family went over for the Paris Exhibition. The Badgers——"

"Come, we're not as low as the Badgers yet;" Gwendoline laughed, and Kitty pealed riotously as her sister proceeded in all seriousness.

"I assure you the Badgers don't consider themselves 'low' at all. Miss Badger has gone to Dresden to study music, and enjoy the German opera! That's a fact. I was told so to-day. And the brother, the one who refuses to sell in the shop, is by way of being an artist. 'An artistic family,' Mrs. Curle calls them."

"Well, I daresay they are," said Gwen, good-naturedly. "Artistic' doesn't make people ladies and gentlemen; and however grand the artistic Miss Badger may be among her opera friends in Germany, she will have to come back to her draper's shop in Willow Lea when she returns home; those sort of people can't really rise, Beatrice."

"You are mistaken; that is just what they can do—as we can sink. Father and mother never see this. They never see that if we do not keep abreast of the times on our own level, we shall be pushed off that level by those who do. We can't simply exist, and ignore all that is going on in the world around us—at least we can, for it is just what we are doing; but it means that we are sinking as surely as others are rising."

"What nonsense! I wish you wouldn't say such things," murmured Gwen, uneasily. "You always do like to make one feel uncomfortable. We, sinking!"

"And the Hoggits, and the Badgers, and the Scrubbses, and the Gubbinses, rising, rising, rising," cried Kitty, with a child's glee at the idea. "Peter Gubbins, who milks the cows——"

"Of course I don't mean them. I was speaking of-"

"But why not? Why not Peter? Why mayn't he rise like the rest? I daresay if we gave him a velveteen coat he would be as 'artistic' as Joe Badger. All he wants is a coat. I'm sure some one might give him the coat."

"I can't be surprised at you, when that is precisely how father and mother feel," said Beatrice, curling her lip. "Their idea is that we are we—that all these people are so immensely below us that they are all on the same footing. But never mind that; that is of no consequence—or rather it is no business of ours; what is our business is that, being placed by birth and position on a higher plane, we ought to live up to our advantages and opportunities. Then we should keep the distance not that I care about the distance, but I do care about filling properly the place to which I am born"—her eye dilating and her tone unconsciously taking a prouder note-"I do care that when we mix with others of our own class we should meet them on their own ground; that we should not feel ourselves, as we surely would feel ourselves, ignorant, narrow-minded, prejudiced, inferior. Take those very village people I was speaking of, the Hoggits. Robert Hoggit is going to Oxford-" "No!"

"He is. You never know anything. He is going in the spring. He will make his mark there. He will very likely enter some learned profession, and may mix with anybody, once he is in it. But father will never see that he is any one but Bob Hoggit, the chemist's son. The chemist's son he may be, but he will know a great deal more, and live a much fuller and wider and more creditable life than we do."

"I don't see in the least what you are driving at, Beatrice. What is all this about? What can we do? We can't be chemist's sons, and go to Oxford, and enter learned professions—especially as we are not men. What are you grumbling about?" muttered Gwendoline, discontentedly. "You go off at such tangents. You first strike out in one direction and then in another. And you invariably end by having a fling at us as a family, from whatever point you start."

"I don't suppose it is any use trying to make you understand;" was all Beatrice vouchsafed in return.

She was not sure that she herself understood. She was conscious of being repressed, thwarted, hedged in, and moreover of a feeling akin to envy of those whose talents and powers were being fostered and developed, while her own were either unrecognised or discouraged. She had no wish to nip in the bud the career of any village Hampden, or to stifle in its birth the possible note of any still mute inglorious Milton, but it did seem hard that she, Beatrice Maynard, should not have at least an equal chance of developing her real self.

Gwen did not feel like this, nor did Kitty. Yet to her view they were almost more to be pitied for their easy acquiescence in things as they were, than had they chafed as she did against the bars. Contentment in their case meant further deterioration. She would at least try to arrest that deterioration.

Matters had gone on like this for some time previous to the wet November afternoon on which we first find the sisters assembled round the drawing-room fire, awaiting an arrival which was of considerable family importance.

For some months past Lady Laura had been ailing. In the summer she had fallen a victim to a sharp attack of influenza, which had been rife in the neighbourhood, and it had left her low in temperament—and in temper.

She was more querulous, more exacting and unreasonable than before. Nothing was right; and poor Sir Henry, who was a peace-at-all-price man, was thankful in the end to agree to a proposition which had at first been flouted by one and all.

"Give her her way; give her her way," said he.

"Only we shall be more ridiculous than ever," observed Beatrice.

"Pho—pho! Ridiculous? What does that matter, if it pleases your mother? If she has a fancy, let her have it, say I."

"To be sure—whatever people think of it," disdainfully.

"Whatever people think of it!" echoed Sir Henry, astonished. "What in the name of wonder does it signify to us what people think? What business have they to think? 'Pon my word," growing warm, for this was a point on which he was vulnerable, "things are come to a pretty pass if the Maynards have to stop and consider what people will think before they can do what they like in their own home. I suppose if I choose to add another footman to my establishment I shall soon have to consult the opinions of all my friends and neighbours! You are always hinting at this, Beatrice. What makes you so absurd?"

"Simply because we do absurd things. This, for instance."

"This? Hey? This?"—his eyebrows going up.

"Yes, this," said she, steadily. "Directly it gets

known that Lady Laura Maynard, with three grownup daughters, all living at home, has engaged a ladycompanion to come and live in the house—or that she has been engaged for her, which is most likely the way in which it will be put—do you know what will be said?"

Sir Henry replied by a sharp look; he was beginning to comprehend.

- "Yes," said Beatrice, returning the look.
- "You mean they will have the confounded impertinence to—to say it's that?" and he tapped his forehead with his fingers.
 - "I should think it very likely."
- "'Pon my word!" But he looked undeniably taken aback. "What? You actually—but I can't believe it. What could have put such a notion into your head? Has any one—?"
- "No. Not yet. Not to me, certainly. But that goes for nothing. Those things are never said to the people they concern, and we should be the last to hear of it if the whole countryside were ringing with the idea. Do we hear other things? Do we know in the least what people say of us or think of us in other ways? We don't, and we can't. What is more, we can't stop their tongues——"
- "Let them wag, then. I say, let them. You are a queer girl, Beatrice. It seems," and he tried for cool contempt, but was obviously flustered, "it seems that you would have us pander to a low taste for gossip, and cut and carve our doings to suit the notions of every Dick, Tom and Harry who runs about with his tongue out. If they choose to tell lies of us——"
 - "But they are not lies."
- "Not lies? Not a lie to say that your poor mother——"
 - "That would be one; but to call this fancy of hers

odd, unnatural, incomprehensible, would be only to say the truth, as it strikes me, and must strike every one who does not suppose—the other thing. Either my mother is putting an open slight upon us all, and showing in deed, if she does not say it in so many words, that our companionship is distasteful to her, or else she is incapable of—in short, she is not like other people."

"Humph!"

"I see no way out of it, however." After a long pause of discomfiture, during which Sir Henry looked this way and that, grunted, muttered, and generally fidgeted with impotent vexation, he pulled his newspaper towards him with an air of dismissing the matter. "I daresay you are right, but it is no use fighting it. She has worried me till I have given in, and we must make the best of a bad job. After all, there's room enough in the house for any number of odd-come-shorts without their bothering us; and in old days women of position had their hangers-on as regularly as their lapdogs and waiting-maids. Put it upon that, can't ye? Say that your mother wants some one to amuse her, to toady her-oh, you know well enough how to do it. You don't need me to coach you; only look here, Beatrice," and a red, emphatic face frowned round the corner of the newspaper, now unfolded and spread in front of the speaker, "there's one thing I won't have said-mind, I won't have it. No one shall dare to hint that Lady Laura Maynard is not as sane as you or I. The poor thing!"-and suddenly the harsh voice melted, and it was a husband who spoke, and spoke in accents which sealed his daughter's lips.

She had had it on the tip of her tongue to scoff at his arbitrary "Won't have," and already an ironical smile had begun to play upon her features—pray, how did he propose to carry out his doughty resolution? Did he

intend to go round the parish, and announce it in every house, or should it be proclaimed from the pulpit, and at the village cross?—but that brief exclamation of tenderness and the look by which it was accompanied surprised and silenced her.

A faint blush also rose to her cheek.

In her first sharp annoyance on hearing that Lady Laura's whim was to be actually carried into effect, she had almost gloated over the interpretation likely to be put upon the matter by many who already looked askance on Maynard Tower and its inmates. "Mother will have brought it upon herself," she said bitterly.

Had there been any truth in the idea, it would have been different; but as Lady Laura was in perfect possession of her faculties, and was merely using her present invalidism as a weapon to extort from her husband permission to gratify a fancy dictated by self-love, and almost certain to foster and increase that self-love to the exclusion of every other sentiment, it was perfectly natural that the step about to be taken should be gall and wormwood to the haughty mind of Beatrice.

Tears of indignation and of humiliation stood in her eyes when she heard of it. Then she burst forth. Then it seemed to her that if this folly were to be persisted in, it would be only a just retribution if rumours, however remote from the truth, were to be in circulation anent a parent who could thus treat her daughters.

Lady Laura openly avowed that she did not want a nurse or a waiting-woman—her own maid had been with her for years, and was invaluable in that position; what she required, her ladyship said, was an agreeable companion, who would sit with her, and drive with her; with whom she could practise her music, and go sketching when warmer weather came; one, also, who would read and discuss the books of the day—in short,

just such a person as is usually wanted by—but here the speaker had perforce to consider her next word.

For in her eloquence, and in what she esteemed to be the reasonable nature of her request, she had absolutely forgotten that she in any wise differed from those lonely and forlorn women whom she was about to quote as in need of the company of others.

When, however, Sir Henry, to whom the above was addressed, bluntly reminded his wife of this fact, Lady Laura had her answer ready. Her daughters went their own ways; had their own pursuits and friends; did not care to be with her, and were always anxious to get away from her.

"Faith, they don't get far, then," muttered he, with a humorous look; "they're good girls enough;" he continued aloud, for the above was sotto voce, "but I suppose if you have set your heart upon some one else, you must have her."

And then he went away and told Beatrice.

Lady Laura had a dear friend and distant relation to whom she wrote charming letters. They were such letters as are quite out-of-date at the present time, but they were none the less interesting and welcome to receive. To pen one took the writer an entire morning. She thought over each sentence, and phrased it carefully. When indited, she paused and surveyed her elegant handwriting, wondered sometimes why none of the girls inherited it, and dotted an "i" or turned up the tail of an "s" before proceeding further.

She had but little news to give, she would observe plaintively—"for we live, as you know, so very quietly, dearest Augusta, that to chronicle events is completely out of my line. But you who live in the gay world, which closed its doors for me so very early in life,

before indeed they had ever fully opened "—(dearest Augusta knew all about this from many a voluminous epistle, for the subject never palled upon the writer)— "you will not expect much from this poor stay-at-home. Married life "—and here would follow a tribute to married life which was not exactly flattering to Sir Henry, nor yet to Sir Henry's daughters, in regard to whom their mother's confidente was given to understand that her friend was hardly fortunate.

"I suppose they are much like others of their age; but when you and I were girls we did not set up our own opinions and battle for our rights as it seems is the fashion in these days. It appears to me that the world has spun round, and that not by any means to its own advantage," continued Lady Laura, who knew about as much of the world as an infant, "but I, for one, have resolved to make a stand. At least, I did so resolve when my health and spirits were more equal to the task. But of late, I will not conceal from you, dearest Augusta, that my daughters, one and all, have passed entirely beyond my control. You, who remember me as a person with some force of character, will perhaps be surprised at such an admission, but you do not knowfor only a parent can know—what girls have arrived at in these self-assertive, democratic times; and mine, I assure you, are no exception to the rule. They are so young and strong; and they will do this and that, whatever I may say. Beatrice, in particular, takes her own line, and simply bears me down whatever objections I may raise to it. She picks up people, and insists on being intimate with them; and from them and at their houses she adopts all the modern notions which are doing so much harm at the present time. She is the one who gives me most trouble. Gwendoline is more gentle, and would be more dutiful if her sister would let

her—at any rate, she is less headstrong than Beatrice. But her nature is selfish, and she is very vain of her appearance. I suppose she is pretty-people say she is very like what I was; indeed, we still resemble each other a good deal in looks—but there, I fancy, it ends. I cannot get her to take any interest in the pursuits which are still my best solace, and she is always fretting after society, and the loss of that admiration she imagines she would receive at its hands, Little Kitty is my best daughter. I don't know what I should do without Kitty. Her sisters are jealous of her; which is, of course, nonsense, as I only talk to her as a sort of child, and because she is more with me, and understands me better, than any one else in the house. Kitty is not so good-looking as either of the others; but she has more heart than Gwen, and a better temper than Beatrice. If I had had a son—" and at this point a smile might · have been seen on the face of the reader, for she could not help thinking that, since Lady Laura had been so unlucky in her daughters, it was somewhat droll that she should be so confident that a hypothetical son would have been a paragon.

Such was the burden of many an overflowing epistle; and their recipient was now the person to whom application was made, when Lady Laura, having wrung consent to her wishes from her husband, essayed to find the lady-companion who was to be, in default of the said hypothetical son, a paragon.

A prompt reply was received; for Miss Kenyon, having been herself fortunate in a like quest (perhaps her encomiums on a certain Miss Beck had first implanted the idea in Lady Laura's head), was not only ready but eager to execute the commission. Would dear Laura trust to her judgment, or would she require to see an applicant for herself?

Lady Laura, who was just about to say she would certainly prefer the latter course, was stopped, pen in hand, by a remark from her eldest daughter. Beatrice had entered the boudoir with other letters requiring answers, and this discussion ended, her mother, whom the success of her scheme had put into good spirits, observed graciously, "It seems there will be no difficulty in getting the person I want. My cousin Augusta answers for that, and has already seen one or two; but she suggests that perhaps I may wish for a personal interview——"

"Of course you will," said Beatrice, shortly. She did not mean it, but her tone of decision instantly took that of authority in her mother's ears. Here again she was being dictated to and domineered over, though the matter concerned herself alone, and was no one else's business. Her brow clouded. "I don't see why I should."

"Do you mean that you would have a woman come to live with you—to live with us—and be about in the rooms, and at every meal, without ever having seen her? Mother, you cannot be so foolish, so rash? Just think what you might let us in for!"

"Augusta Kenyon can surely judge as well as you or I, perhaps a little better, considering the sphere she moves in, and her opportunities and experience," quoth Lady Laura, bridling; "a friend of mine and a connection of my family may be trusted, one would think, to use her utmost discretion and knowledge, and to have some little discretion and knowledge at command"—her warmth increasing. "You may not set a high opinion on your mother's friends, Beatrice, preferring your own, I suppose; but it is enough for me that one whom I value and esteem and have known as my most intimate friend and correspondent for years offers to do me this service. I shall certainly accept her offer."

- "I thought you said she inquired whether you would not prefer to have a personal interview?"
- "As an alternative. But that is merely a piece of politeness. She could hardly say she would ship off an unknown individual without giving me the option."
- "Mother, do take it. I don't mean to vex you"—and the tone and manner of the speaker were more befitting the relative positions of the two than had yet been manifested—"but you must see how very important this is? Cousin Augusta——"
- "What about cousin Augusta?" demanded Lady Laura sharply.
- "I know she is fond of you, and would take a great deal of trouble on your behalf; but she has no notion—she does not know how we live here; it is years since she has been at Maynard Towers; and if she selects for you the sort of lady-companion who would suit herself——"
 - "Precisely what I hope she will do."
- "You are not in the least alike," persisted Beatrice, desperately. "Cousin Augusta is fond of society and variety——"
 - "She is fond of me," said her mother, with emphasis.
- "Do you think she knows you? At least—it is so difficult to say it—but people in letters do often make themselves out, without meaning to do so, very different from what they are. I don't mean you, mother, in particular; I mean everybody. It is not one person in a thousand who is natural in a letter. I often think so of myself. Sometimes when I am feeling so cross and disagreeable that I can hardly speak to those about me, I sit down and write as if I were in the best of humours, and make jokes, and even pull myself round again before I have done. But the letter isn't me. Now supposing——"
 - "You would insinuate that I pass myself off with her

as an affectionate, good-tempered person, but that she would find me quite the opposite if she came here?"

"I think that she would probably give a—a—an unreliable impression of you, and of us, and of life at Maynard Towers, to the person she wished to engage for you, and that we should all suffer for it afterwards."

"You would not suffer; you would have nothing to do with her."

"If you like, I would go to London and see her."

But this offer, which a more experienced and wary diplomatist would never have advanced, only served, as our readers can well imagine, to clinch Lady Laura's decision; and the result was that Miss Emma Adam was expected to arrive at her new destination on the wet November day we have described at the beginning of this chapter, without having been seen by anybody.

"There she is;" announced Kitty, from the window.

At the same moment her eldest sister re-entered the room. Whatever Beatrice's state of mind, she never allowed it to influence her attitude towards a stranger, and since Lady Laura was unable to be in the drawing-room herself—for she was in bed with a cold—she should be suitably represented.

"The big carriage and both the men," murmured Gwen, rousing herself to take a peep by Kitty's side. "I should have thought something less than that would have done in this pouring rain. Why couldn't a cab have been ordered from the station?"

"I heard mother tell Mrs. Stead to be most particular that Colvin should take the big brougham, and drive himself, and take William too." Kitty, who was always pleased to show knowledge when her sisters were ignorant, looked round with an air of bestowing agreeable information. "Mother said she knew Colvin would shirk, if Mrs. Stead didn't say those were her orders."

"Yet my poor little matron from the hospital was allowed to come up yesterday in the cart, and get wet through," observed Beatrice, dryly. "But then she was only my matron. Mother's visitors are different."

"You might have done better for her if you had only wheedled a little," nodded Kitty. "I know. For I was with mother directly after you left, and she was really rather sorry, and kept saying she was sure the day was clearing, and that the men did so dislike taking out carriages that required a lot of cleaning, in weather like this. When she knew poor little Mrs. Short had come up in the very teeth of the storm, she sent word to have her things dried; and you know if she would have taken wine, mother said she was to have it."

"Do be quiet, child. Who constituted you mother's champion?" And Beatrice frowned annoyance.

"Well, I will stick up for her," quoth Kitty, doggedly. "She would not be half so bad as she is if you——" but here the door opened.

The door opened to admit a person whom it is difficult to describe except by negatives. Miss Emma Adam was neither young, nor tall, nor handsome, nor particularly well dressed. She looked her part, the part she was about to assume in Maynard Towers, and there was a timidity, almost a trepidation in her air, that seemed to indicate that all her life hitherto had been passed in a state of humble dependence.

A middle-aged woman attired in black, with black silk gloves—Gwen, who was dainty on the point, noticed the gloves; while Beatrice, disarmed in spite of herself, inwardly noted a little quavering note in the voice and a hesitation in the step which called for re-assurance and forbearance.

It was Beatrice who bade the traveller draw near the fire, and herself stirred with a poker the sleepy logs into a blaze. To Kitty's surprise her sister then rang the bell peremptorily. "Tea at once—oh, it is there;" as the footman bore in the urn at the moment. "One always wants tea the very moment one comes in off a journey," continued Miss Maynard, in her kindliest, most gentle accents, the accents that always seemed to wipe out every unfavourable impression of the speaker from the memory of those who heard, and that sometimes smote on Lady Laura's ear with a throb of real pain, for why were they so seldom addressed to her?—"Do take off your boa, and you are quite sure you are not wet?" Beatrice ran on. ("Just as if she had been a real visitor," inwardly commented Kitty, who had been waiting to take her cue from her sisters, but who was now all bustle and alacrity.)

"And pray don't think that it always rains in Somersetshire," continued Miss Maynard, gaily. "We do look a shade damp, I admit."

"And I daresay you never saw such mud in your life as we have in our lanes?" It was now Kitty's turn; Gwen was inspecting the tea table, and lifting the cover of the one hot dish. Did it contain crumpets? She was fond of crumpets, and the revelation of buttered toast in the place of the more succulent dainty was a distinct disappointment.

Buttered toast was the refuge of the destitute—or the lazy. It came up when no one would be at the trouble of providing anything better, and was an indication of contempt for the new arrival, despite her ladyship's order for carriage and men-servants. Lady Laura was safe in bed, and buttered toast was good enough for the drawing-room.

Gwen glanced at her sister, but again the better manners of the latter prevailed. She cheerfully offered the toast, took some herself, and appeared to see nothing. Miss Adam's experience of the journey down was next inquired into.

Miss Adam owned that the day was unfavourable and that the hours had seemed long. She had not been able to obtain a foot-warmer: they were not provided for third-class carriages. Her fellow-travellers had not been interesting.

But at least she had been met comfortably? She had been easily found by the footman?

Oh, quite easily. Oh yes, and it was very kind of Sir Henry to send a closed carriage—at this point Sir Henry, curiosity overcoming reluctance, shuffled into the room.

"How am I to meet her? Am I to shake hands?"—he had inquired of his wife, and Miss Adam being Lady Laura's *protégée*, and her cousin Augusta's nominee, he had been desired to shake hands, which he now did with a fair show of cordiality.

Then the journey was started again, and again the bad day, the foot-warmer, and the uninteresting fellow-travellers played their parts.

What to say when these were finally disposed of was the question. Here was a person whom none of the rest of the party knew anything whatever about; who on her part was equally ignorant concerning them; and who could neither make an opening for herself nor take advantage of one when made for her. They had not even Miss Augusta Kenyon in common, since it appeared that she was still less known to the humble little London woman than to her country relatives. Sir Henry, indeed, made an effort to be interested in Miss Kenyon's health. "I hope she is very well?" said he. "Haven't seen her for—let me see—not for a score of years."

"More than that." It was Kitty, the family corrector, who could not let this pass. "Mother and I were

reckoning, and it is just twenty-seven years. Mother says she was here once soon after you were married, before Beatrice was born."

"Well, well: I daresay. Your mother knows best. Time flies and one forgets," said Sir Henry, half annoyed, half amused, for Kitty was a privileged person, and, besides, it was something to have anybody talk. Beatrice had withdrawn into her shell directly he appeared, and Gwen was making the best of the tea-table, such as it was. "So we are all the more obliged to our friend for—for having been so fortunate," proceeded Sir Henry, with old-fashioned politeness and a little bow to point his meaning. "And now, what do you say, girls?—do you think your mother——?" looking to them for relief.

"Mother said I was to bring Miss Adam to her as soon as she had finished her tea, and taken off her things," announced Kitty; and Beatrice, who had risen at her father's hint, stood still and bit her lip. So then she was not even to be permitted to keep up appearances for a single hour? Would Miss Adam—what would she think?

But it did not matter; she probably knew enough already for the above to cause her no surprise; since it was hardly likely that years of epistolary intimacy had not long before this put Miss Augusta Kenyon in full possession of the family attitude one towards another, and when engaging a person who was so soon to enter the household, prudence would impel her to drop a hint. "Of course she knows, or if she does not know now, she will soon, that Beatrice Maynard is a mere cipher in her father's house," reflected she, bitterly.

"Will you come now, Miss Adam?" said Kitty, opening the door.

CHAPTER II.

"I AM ALWAYS FIGHTING AND STRUGGLING WITH MY LIFE."

"AND so she came. And what do you think of her?" cried Mrs. William Curle, the rich brewer's pretty little wife, on the appearance of Beatrice Maynard in her drawing-room the following day.

Mrs. Curle was certain she would have this visitor, and had been busy in the morning letting fall allusions to the prospect. "Can't arrange anything for this afternoon, positively, no; for poor dear Beatrice Maynard is sure to run in to tell me about the new arrival. Beatrice is so worried about it; and she always runs to me with her worries."

- "Well?" proceeded the speaker eagerly, now that the triumphant moment had arrived.
- "She seems pretty harmless." Beatrice sat down, prepared to be discursive and confidential. "Not in the least offensive, at any rate; and that is as much as one could expect."
 - "Old or young?"
- "About the usual age, I suppose. Perhaps a little older. I should say not far from fifty."
- "And not aggressive? Did not take you all under her wing at the start?" And the speaker laughed with a little air of experience. "I know the kind so well. I must own I was half afraid for you."
- "Were you? I don't think we were afraid for ourselves. It was not Miss Adam herself, not as she now

is, but of what our mother will turn her into, that we-but, after all, she can't do us much harm. It's her being here at all "—significantly.

"I know. You poor things. It must be a nuisance. And I suppose now Lady Laura will be more unapproachable than ever, and even Kitty won't have a chance. Will she always be about whenever one calls? And must one include her in invitations?"

"Not to me. Miss Adam has nothing to do with me. I have been very distinctly told that. And as my mother scarcely ever goes anywhere——"

"I see. Well, my dear, one must make the best of it. And I have been doing what I can for you in the neighbourhood. I made a round of calls the other day, and spoke of Lady Laura's health, and her illness in the summer, and of the new acquisition to the household, as if it were quite a matter-of-course that there should be some one in that capacity. I stood up for the family, I assure you, Beatrice."

"You mean that people are talking about us? But of course they are."

"And what I do," rejoined her friend, playing with the utmost ease upon the susceptible instrument beneath her hands, "is simply to contradict every single thing that is said. I won't allow for a moment that you are not all as fond of each other as possible! I say, What nonsense! when people begin about you and your mother not suiting each other, and not getting on together. I told Mrs. Tomlinson yesterday that I knew the Maynards a great deal more intimately than she did, and that you were my particular friend. She shut up after that."

"Thank you," said Beatrice, but not with especial fervour.

"It really doesn't matter, you know," continued she,

after a little pause. "It is very good of you to fight our battles——"

"Ah, trust me for that. No one shall say nasty things of any one of you in my hearing."

"They will say them all the more out of it;" a faint smile played on the speaker's lips; then, unable to repress a desire to know more, "You might as well say what you did hear, Daisy". 'Daisy,' substituted for the more formal appellation, would probably have surprised some people to hear; but then few knew how intimate the two now together had become, since no one altogether credited what Mrs. Willie Curle said about a good many subjects.

Mrs. Curle paid her court to Lady Laura Maynard with extraordinary cleverness. It astonished and annoyed the older inhabitants of the neighbourhood to find that the neglect and inattention which they had to put up with and had learned to endure philosophically (because the Maynards never were like other people, and Lady Laura never did put herself out to pay civility to any one) were abrogated in the Curles' case.

"You do manage mother wonderfully," Beatrice would exclaim to her friend.

And the result was that Lady Laura's carriage would be seen turning in at the brand-new iron and gilttopped gates of the brand-new, spruce, and spacious villa, six or seven times for once it turned in at any other entrance far or near.

But though the adroit, insinuating little woman had early in the day penetrated the hidden springs whence emanated so much that gave offence and rendered the Maynards unpopular in their native place—so that she had contrived most skilfully to obtain a footing with them which was the pride of her life—Daisy now and then found herself puzzled. Also she now and then made mistakes, though she did not know it.

On the present occasion it was her intention to let Beatrice Maynard understand that her own able and single-handed championship alone protected The Towers and its inmates from floods of ill-natured gossip; and Beatrice, who, as we know, was already morbidly susceptible on the point, was in truth dying to hear, even though aware that what she was likely to hear would be but a fresh source of mortification.

If she could have done without the knowledge, and felt the indifference she longed to assume, how much better it would have been!

Yes, better: for however freely she might descant to her sisters on the family demerits, however much she might lament the infatuations which prevented their seeing themselves in the light that others saw them—to be hearkening as it were through a back door to the world's voice was a humiliating device, unworthy of her dignity.

Any glimmering of this uneasiness would have taught her friend caution, but Daisy Curle had no such glimmering. She plunged boldly in.

"Of course you know there is always a nasty feeling about you all, dear. That is a fact. You are not popular: you don't make yourselves liked. Some people never do. They can't help it. Now, there were the Fitzhuberts—oh, don't say I am always speaking of them—of course I am. I can't help it. They were such charming people, so delightfully genial. One felt one knew them intimately the very first day. Although they were people of title they did not mind where they went; they went to every one who asked them. And dear Vi Fitzhubert had the sweetest manners. She was simply raved about by every one at Homburg and Biarritz and Monte Carlo. She told me herself—for we were quite on the same terms that I am with you—that she would be simply

miserable if she felt that there was a single creature she knew who did not worship her. I said, 'Dear Violet, that is just why every one does worship you'. And you know it really is the only way."

" Is it?"

"There now, how coldly you speak! You are a Maynard at this moment, my dear. 'Is it?' indeed! You despise the very idea."

"Well, I do," said Beatrice, frankly. "At least," hesitating, "I think that rage for being 'worshipped' may be carried too far. If I, for instance, were to be miserable——"

"Oh, but you are different."

"Because 'any single creature'-"

"I was stating an exceptional case, dear."

"I should be unable to endure the accumulated weight of my misery," persisted Beatrice, with a mingling of jest and earnest, yet with an underlying intonation of some other emotion which did not altogether escape the other's ear— "I, who am never likely to be worshipped by any human being—who have nothing in me worth worshipping—and whose best hope is to escape condemnation. You will never turn me, nor any of us, into popular idols, Daisy."

Daisy saw that she had gone too far.

"People cannot change their natures," she observed sententiously, "and it is as natural to you to care only to be appreciated by the few, as it was to my other friend to covet the applause of the many."

"The difference is that she won her desire, but I shall never win mine."

The speaker turned her head aside with the words, but somehow the shrewd, keen-sighted little woman at her side knew that tears had risen to her eyes.

"No, I shall never be happy," continued Beatrice in a low voice, as though communing with herself, "what is

there to make me happy? I don't love others—why should I be loved? I am always fighting and struggling with my life—how should it yield me any sweetness in return? You say it is impossible to change one's nature, but it seems to me I—feel sometimes as if mine might be changed. I am not always what I am sometimes. I am not altogether what I seem at any time."

"You are always very—very nice to me," stammered her companion, somewhat disconcerted at the turn the conversation had taken, though even then thinking "I shall let the Tomlinsons know that Beatrice Maynard confidentialises with me, and tells me everything about herself"—"and I am sure you undervalue your own good points," proceeded she, aloud. "Whatever I may have said about my former friend, Beatrice, of course I did not mean to compare her with you. Violet was the silliest creature; and thought of nothing but her looks, and her dress, and how to captivate men. Not that she neglected women, but the men came first. And you are really ever so much superior——"

"How am I to believe this? One minute you say one thing, and the next another. Leave Lady Fitzhubert out of the question—I don't know her, and I don't care about her. There, I am rude to you; but we were talking 'straight' to each other just now, and I want to go on doing so, just for a minute. You were vaunting your friend's charm of manner and disposition, and holding her up as an example, were you not?"

"I did not say anything about her disposition"—significantly.

"At any rate, you said she laid herself out to please, and succeeded in pleasing—and you contrasted her with me, and us all. Now, I am wondering," slowly, "if that kind of good-will, the kind Lady Fitzhubert sought and obtained, is worth the having? You think it is?"

"Certainly."

"Perhaps you are right—in default of anything better. But to me it seems a poor, cheap imitation of something very fine and rare. I should like"—she paused, the better to accentuate her words, paused, and her eye unconsciously wandered into vacancy, seeing something which did not exist for Daisy Curle and such as her—"I should wish so to live as to deserve without asking for it, without striving for it, without throwing abroad nets and traps to catch it, the love of my fellow-creatures."

Beatrice did not walk directly home, when she left The Hollies. There was time to make a détour of the park before the light waned; and she turned into a wooded path which, as it lay among uplands, was passable, though many of the others were not, after the rain of the day before.

The peaceful scene, the solitude, and fresh, mild air upon her brow (for she took off her hat presently) soothed her spirit, and she felt glad to be alone and think.

How was it that she had been led into saying so much more of her own feelings and emotions than was usual with her, or than intercourse with Mrs. Curle had ever produced before?

She had sought the latter's society partly because it afforded an outlet, and an outlet must be had for relieving her bosom of some of its habitual burden; partly because that curious instinct for self-torture which most of us possess, prompted her to long to hear, from lips ever ready to tell, repetitions of the vexatious and irritating remarks of others, such as she was confident were passing, and would only reach her ear through this channel.

But although Mrs. Curle had made it plain that these

were rife, she had not particularised; and instead had deftly turned the conversation on to a favourite theme, the surpassing merits of a former patroness. Even to the perception of Beatrice herself, it was clear that "Patroness" was the word to be applied to the connection between the society beauty of high degree and far-reaching notoriety, and the humble satellite who had doubtless clung to the hem of her garment.

Next, Daisy had wheeled on her own front, and, fearful apparently of affronting by personal comparison the feelings of her new friend, made that comparison invidious to the old.

She had shown a cunning discrimination which evinced that she could only be blind when she chose. Would she likewise dissect in cold blood Beatrice herself, her motives and springs of action, if inclination and opportunity offered? The thought crossed the latter's mind.

But she did not dwell upon it. What mainly occupied her as she traversed the narrow wood-path and rustled through its fallen leaves, instinctively picking her way across soft and muddy ground, was the remembrance of the self-revelation into which she had been betrayed, and which had fallen, in plain terms, so flat.

When the Curles made their advent into the neighbourhood some six months previous to the date at which our story opens, Beatrice was sure that she had found a friend in the young married woman, who without family cares and ties—for she was childless, and with a husband easy, indulgent, and often away from home, who made no demands upon her leisure—was at liberty for free and perpetual intercourse. It was delightful to have found such an one.

And Lady Laura would certainly have been annoyed at her daughter's air of animation after the first unrestrained interview, had not the clever little newcomer, who perceived that her ladyship's countenance and support would be quite as necessary to her in the future as the partiality of even the reserved and haughty Beatrice, of whom it was generally alleged nobody could make anything—had not she, we say, taken pains to obtain the elder lady's good graces also.

On occasions, Lady Laura would, it is true, include Mrs. Curle in a sweeping condemnation of prevailing manners; and the latter's lively desire to wake up sleeping dogs, in the shape of divers social institutions which had fallen into a state of torpor for lack of interest, was a fruitful source of complaint; but, on the whole, more was tolerated from the rich brewer's young busybody of a wife, than would have been endured from many others incomparably more worthy of forbearance.

Daisy also instructed Beatrice how to manage her mother. It was by no means her wish to see a perfectly good understanding established between the two—such, indeed, would have been a distinct loss to herself; but if Beatrice could refrain from making her new friend the object of disputes, and could steadily hold her peace supposing Lady Laura made a disparaging remark—("What does it matter? Your mother won't like me the better—but she may the worse—for anything you say," laughed the little lady)—there would, in time, cease to be any friction, and the inmates of Maynard Towers would grow accustomed to looking upon herself as Beatrice's friend.

"Only if I hear unjust and untrue things being said, I can't bear to let them pass," urged the former.

"You dear thing! But they do no harm. We all know that Lady Laura is cranky—excuse my saying so. I was told what to expect when we came here; and that she would be sure to turn up her nose at me; but I didn't mind a bit. I knew I had only to wait a

little; and now she is as kind and nice as possible. But of course she will say little things, and you must just not mind them."

Acting on this advice, even when her mother called her friend "A vulgar little woman," Beatrice refrained herself.

And she had her reward. Lady Laura might querulously protest that Daisy Curle usurped the whole of her eldest daughter's time and thoughts; she might even in the abstract issue a fitful prohibition to never-ending to-ing and fro-ing between the houses—but she never definitely forbade Beatrice to seek out Daisy, nor turned Daisy from her own door.

In her heart she sometimes rather wondered at Beatrice. She had been impulsive herself as a younger woman; and her intimacy with Augusta Kenyon, though it had now stood the test of time, had been hastily formed, so hastily indeed and on so slight a foundation, that it is possible the speedy parting and the absolute severance of personal intercourse which followed alone sustained it.

Laura Keane, the débutante, had been amazingly flattered and gratified by the adoration of Augusta Kenyon, the schoolgirl. Laura married, and Augusta was her bridesmaid. A single visit had been paid to the young couple, while all was still clad in roseate hues at Maynard Towers, and the bride the centre of attraction and attention in a country neighbourhood; and there, in so far as regarded actual personal knowledge of each other—if such a thing could be said ever to have existed at all—the matter ended.

Not so its effect on the weak mind and tenacious self-love of Lady Laura. Had she commanded other homage, fresh, spontaneous, and sincere as that of her young relative, she might have forgotten Augusta,—but none offered itself.

She was not a lovable woman; the affection excited

in Augusta's heart was not, as she fondly imagined, a tribute to her own endearing qualities; it was rather the outburst of a warm heart at a loss for some object on which to lavish its tenderness. Augusta was an orphan, alone in the world.

Almost immediately after her one and only visit to Maynard Towers, she had been summoned abroad by a guardian, with whom she had resided in various countries, till youth passed and middle age drew on; and still the friends maintained their old relations steadily, by dint of those letters to which reference has been made—and still Lady Laura believed firmly that what she had been once in her dearest Augusta's eyes, she was still.

A curious reluctance, however, held her back from urging Miss Kenyon to come and see for herself. In her secret heart she knew that she was not more altered beyond recognition in person than in mind.

This digression is merely offered to our readers, because it may have surprised them that such a woman as Lady Laura Maynard, a gentlewoman when all is said and done, could tolerate as her daughter's chosen companion and confidante any one so inferior by birth and education as Mrs. William Curle. "If Beatrice had been like me-but she has a colder nature, or, at any rate, she is too proud to be quite on terms of equality with that little person," cogitated her ladyship—"she would never let herself down to any one of that stamp. Since it is plain that a talent for making friendships runs in the family, it is as well, perhaps, that Beatrice should be content with Mrs. Curle, who is sensible and understands her position; for I should never have known what she was saying if she had taken up with one of those Parkington girls, or, indeed, with any girls of her own standing. I know how I used to take, and indeed still take, Augusta Kenyon into confidence."

And now Beatrice for the first time was feeling that she also had given her confidence. She had said aloud what hitherto she had said only to herself. In an unguarded moment she had permitted to escape a deep and passionate desire—the yearning of a noble nature to be loved and to be worthy of love.

Her habitual attitude, carefully preserved, was that of proud indifference to the affection, while yet deferring to the opinion, of the world. In diatribes which aroused Gwen but faintly and Kitty not at all, she never reverted to the need for human sympathy and tenderness which lay at the very root of her being; nor did they, while imagining that she spoke openly of what most concerned her, ever dream that the last thing she was likely to do was to lay bare her heart.

As regarded religion, it may surprise my readers to learn that Beatrice was a religious girl. She has not hitherto evinced this—indeed her life but faintly exhibited the strength of her principles—yet those who knew her in its most intimate relations, who witnessed from day to day her faults and shortcomings, never doubted for a moment that she owned an allegiance to which she herself frankly admitted she did but little credit. "You know what is right; why don't you do it?" she would say at a momentous crisis, and the words were no empty form; but in the trivial round of everyday life the influence even of her deepest convictions made itself but dimly felt. A struggle was forever going on within her breast, and what would be the result in after life remained to be seen.

In her new friend, Beatrice at first imagined she beheld the fruits of a brighter and more lively faith than her own. There was a shallow, emotional fervour about Daisy Curle which sent her flying to services and sacraments, and prompted a *furore* of benevolent excitement

wherever she went. Daisy was great in the parish; great in rustling in and out of the school-house; her ponycarriage was for ever at the vicarage door; every subscription list bristled with her own and her husband's names.

"She does what we ought to do," said Beatrice Maynard, in reply to Lady Laura's annoyance, and Sir Henry's uplifted eyebrows. "If we don't take up our proper place, I don't see how we can complain that others take it from us. Mr. Tomlinson says the Curles are a blessing to the parish."

"They pander to Tomlinson, and give him thumping subscriptions," retorted her father. "He was content enough with what we did before they came, but now-" and he shrugged his shoulders gloomily.

"Those sort of people do so much for show," was his wife's verdict. "Not that one would wish to be uncharitable," appended she, after a moment's thought. "But it is a little hard, after having gone on quietly for so many years, and no one ever supposing that we did not do what was right and proper, to have these new, rich people thrusting themselves into our midst, and upsetting everything."

Beatrice, as a matter of course, took an opposite and irritating view of the matter.

It was honest; she genuinely felt humbled before the activity of the Curles, of Mrs. Curle in particular; and the more their doings excited dispraise in her home, the more she applauded them in her heart.

More than this, she was willing to follow Daisy Curle's lead. "You may count on me-if mother will let me," she would say with the utmost readiness, without a trace of jealousy or reluctance, when a new scheme was proiected.

And Daisy was careful, very careful. She perceived

that Beatrice Maynard was superior to every species of petty vanity, and that to endorse unrestrainedly her own low opinion of herself and her people was in itself a way to gain her heart,—but she also saw that she must not shock Beatrice. What Beatrice mainly lamented in the Maynards was an absence of geniality, the lack of which would not have moved Daisy herself at all. "You think your family ought to bustle up and make a figure in the world," she had once suggested, in all good faith thinking this hit the mark,—and Beatrice turned her large, dark eyes in a sort of amazement upon her at the words. "It isn't that," she said, slowly.

Thereafter the lively narrator of the scene giggled merrily over it to her husband. "She is such a solemn girl. She thinks she was born Queen of Sheba, and ought to live up to the position. All the ghosts of all her ancestors haunt her with uplifted fingers and threatenings."

"What do they want of her?" inquired he.

"Goodness knows!—She doesn't. Or, at any rate, I can't understand. She is full of the apathy, and indolence, and ignorance of the present generation of the Maynards—including that of the past, I may add, though this is discreetly inferred rather than said in so many words; all their sins of omission and commission—mainly of omission, for they appear to do nothing but vegetate—are broadly set forth; yet when I instance the Fitzhuberts and other smart people as successful and popular, Beatrice rolls her eyes at me, and exclaims sepulchrally 'It isn't that'."

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed the brewer. "I expect it is that, though," nodded he, jingling the money in his pockets. "Miss Beatrice finds it a bit slow sticking on at home, especially at such a home as hers, stupid to the last degree; and she would like to break loose if she could. Why on earth she doesn't——"

- "The parents wouldn't hear of it for a moment."
- "Then she should throw the parents over."
- "And where is the money to come from then? Don't be ridiculous, Willie."
- "Do you mean to say those young women are still dependent on their father and mother? 'Pon my word! Why, each of my sisters had her own banking account—."

"That's the law of compensation," Daisy interrupted with a nod and a laugh. "If your sisters had belonged to the upper ten, they might have whistled for their banking accounts, my dear Willie. Don't you know that old families invariably scrimp the daughters? The sons get everything. In the Maynards' case, there being no sons, one might have thought the girls would have a look in; but they haven't. Sir Henry keeps the purse-strings as fast as if he had to dole out gratuities to a workhouse; and those poor things have to do upon dress allowances that would hardly keep me in shoe strings."

"Ah, you little piece of extravagance! I know what that means, to my cost. Shoe strings indeed!"—and he chuckled amorously.

"So now you see how the land lies at Maynard Towers?" proceeded Daisy, after an interlude in which she had taken advantage of the above good-humour to wheedle out of him a promised birthday present, which was to render a diamond rivière complete; "and you won't ask again why those unfortunate girls are quiet beneath the yoke? Quiet, they are not—at least, one of them is not—however. Beatrice champs at the bit." And as a reward for his complacency, he was often regaled thereafter with details of a nature similar to the preceding.

We left Beatrice pursuing her solitary meditations. At first they were occupied, as was natural, with the

interview from which she had just come; but presently they turned to its one point of absorbing interest, her own confession and what it meant to herself. If she had only one person—only one—to love her! Admirers and suitors there had been both for herself and her sisters—but these had one and all been dismissed without a pang. No one had yet offered whom any one of the three cared about in the slightest, or would have accepted as a husband, even if free to do so. But lovers?

At twenty-six years of age she had not yet seen the man who professed to know the meaning of the word as she interpreted it.

To marry as her mother had done—and thereafter to jog along with a husband as her mother was doing—always condescending, always superior and convinced of her own superiority—never wholly satisfied that she might not have done better—and ready in a manner as incomprehensible as it was obvious to resent the felicity of any one of her sex whose betrothal promised more than her own had brought herself—to follow such a lead would be intolerable. Better anything than that. Better Maynard Towers and bondage parental than such a way of escape.

But if God would only take pity on her, and send her some one? Albeit alone, with only the grey sky overhead, and the whispering woods on every side, a deep blush burned in her cheek as the thought arose.

Lights were flitting to and fro within the mansion, and the stable clock struck five as Beatrice emerged from the shrubbery, and hurried towards a side door. Her mother did not approve of late rambles, and she had been out longer than she knew. It was true that Lady Laura was confined to her bedroom—but whilst rebelling both secretly and openly against restrictions fretting at her

age, Beatrice would have scorned to linger outside a minute later in Lady Laura's absence than she would have done had reproaches awaited her. Those, indeed, she might brave, and often did brave-but now she almost ran.

"Come along; what says the fairy Daisy?" demanded Gwen, who had got her cup and plate filled at the teatable and was sinking into an easy-chair as her sister entered the room. "You must have had the run of your tongue there to-day. Luckily, mother is so taken up with her new toy that she never missed you. But we knew where you had gone,"-laughing.

"There was nothing to know." Beatrice sat down affecting an air of indifference. "We all went out, I suppose?"

"We did not all go to The Hollies. It would have been a joke if we had met there. But Kitty and I had the charity to leave the field clear for you. In return, you might tell us what went on. Did Daisy say anything?"

"It was not likely that we sat in silence," retorted Beatrice, provokingly. She was not usually ill-tempered with the amiable and inoffensive Gwen, with whom, indeed, it would have been hard to pick a quarrel, but something at the moment "touched her close" as the poet hath it. Although she was only vaguely aware of the fact, Daisy Curle had disappointed her, more, had a little disgusted her-we can guess how.

"You needn't be cross," said Gwen, placidly. "I only want to hear what went on; what was said about Miss Adam, and all the rest? I am quite prepared to be sociable."

Who could resist such good-humour?

"Where is Miss Adam?" said Beatrice, looking round. "I thought she would be here. Oh, she is having her tea with mother, is she?"

"And Kitty has sneaked in, and they are all very jolly together, no doubt. But we have got a good cake here, anyhow,"—and Gwen first showed her pretty teeth in a smile, and then munched away contentedly.

"So now for the Daisy visit. Was the man with her, or was she alone?"

"The man! What man?"

"What man! Why, the man," said Gwen, surprised.

"Daisy's man; who has been stopping at The Hollies all this week. Do you mean to say you don't know?"

"Don't know!"

"Good gracious, Beatrice, don't stare like a ghoul. One would think you had never in your life heard of such a thing as a tame cat, or a *tertium quid*, or whatever you choose to call it. Not that I don't suppose Daisy Curle is the soul of respectability——"

"In that case the terms you use are inadmissible."

"I daresay they are. I got them out of Kipling, and his Anglo-Indian women aren't quite—I mean poor little Daisy Curle isn't quite one of them. But she is a little flirt, Beatrice, though she takes you in. She lets things out to me; she and I would really suit each other better than you and she do, only you took her up, and she is as proud as Punch of it."

"And what does she let out to you?"

"What a tone! It would kill her with a knife if she heard it. Oh, I don't tell tales, my dear; but I thought you, with your superior penetration and ability, must know that dear William has occasionally to play second-fiddle in his own house."

"It seems to me many husbands have to do that." A vivid recollection of her own recent musings infused asperity into the speaker's tone. "Girls marry, not because they care for the man, not because they believe in his caring for them——"

"His caring for them! What grammar!"

"You know what I mean," impatiently. "Say 'A girl' then; the silly thing wants to run loose, to have her own house, carriage, and opera box—with all the rest of it. Or, perhaps," continued Beatrice, speaking more for herself than for an auditor who was paying but negligent attention, "perhaps she is simpler, more domestic; and thinks it would be nice to have a husband to take care of her, and children to take care of-to be somebody to some one, in short,—but she does not very much mind what that some one is, and thinks the one who has turned up will do as well as any other. So she takes him, and then-"

"Well, then?" queried her sister, her interest caught at this point by something in the other's tone. "What then?"

"Then," said Beatrice, significantly, "comes the-what was the phrase you used?—the 'tertium quid'—that is, if the girl has any heart at all, and is not content to-"

"To what? You will keep breaking off just when you are growing interesting. Supposing I, for instance, were to marry a nice man whom I liked well enough—well, what?"

"Oh, you?" A faint contempt tinged the accent of indulgence.

"Yes, me. I like to be personal. I don't care for your abstract dissertations. What should I have to do without, if I didn't bother about a heart, and just pleased myself and my family when I married."

"I don't know that you would have to do without anything of which you would be conscious."

"Not made that way,"-Gwen laughed frankly. "Come, that's some comfort; I need not anticipate evil. For yourself, I suppose?"—pausing with a look of inquiry.

"For me it would be very dangerous."

- "Would it! Why?;"
- "Because I should not be content to do without—that other thing."
 - "What other thing?"
 - "The greatest thing in the world. Love."

Perhaps the opening of the door at the moment was felt by both sisters to be opportune.

"If she had pressed me, I should certainly have let out about Houston Everest," reflected Gwen. "I thought she knew—knew that he was over there, at least. Luckily, we got off the subject; and when Beatrice begins to maunder among her own thoughts she is sure to get lost. But that little Daisy is a cat. Fancy her never mentioning his name!"

Daisy, however, had mentioned Major Everest's name; Daisy was far too astute to omit doing so, and adding that her guest was out shooting with her husband that afternoon—which ordinary information Beatrice had no interest to deny in connection with her sister. It was Gwen's epithet "The man" which misled her.

The man! Surely Gwen was talking nonsense. Of all the people she had ever met, pretty little Mrs. Curle with her busy brain teeming with schemes and charities—with her absorbing interest in the affairs of her neighbours superadded to her own—above all with a husband whom she called "Willie," was the last to seem in need of that third person whom Beatrice herself allowed to be—to be—"Nonsense," said Beatrice Maynard, aloud, "I was merely instancing peculiar cases—pshaw! I was thinking of my own. I couldn't be content with a 'Willie'. But as to poor little Daisy who can, it is too bad to suppose that she flirts with this Major Everest, merely because she is proud of his staying with them, and talks about it. Gwen, in her way—it's not quite nice in Gwen, and I wish she wouldn't do it—most likely herself began to Daisy

about the flirting. Gwen thinks girls like that sort of thing."

"I met Curle and a friend coming home from the coverts," observed Sir Henry, at dinner. "Not much luck, they said."

"Did he introduce the friend?" inquired Gwen. "Was his name Everest?"

"Something of that sort; aye, that was what it sounded like. Tall, good-looking fellow."

"Poor 'Willie' didn't look much beside him, I daresay."

"'Willie' never looks much beside anybody," replied Sir Henry, laughing. "Monstrous fat he's getting for a young man. Too good a cook, too big luncheon hampers. And how have you got on to-day, Miss Adam?"—turning politely to her. "Been out?"

No, Miss Adam had not been out. Lady Laura having been able to be in her boudoir, the time had been pleasantly occupied in reading and music. Lady Laura would not be able to leave the house for a day or two.

"Oh, yes," acquiesced Sir Henry.

Music and reading? Yes, to be sure. Such things were not in his line; indeed, an old complaint of him was that he never opened a book; but since they amused his wife, and Miss Adam had been got to amuse his wife, he nodded complacently.

But what on earth was he to talk about? He supposed he ought to talk; he was too much of a gentleman to consume his food in silence with a stranger present; and the very fact that this uncomfortable stranger was in a dependent position obliged him to be more punctilious. He cast about in his mind, and at length a topic was found—the war. Unfortunately the war was not at an interesting stage, and the dramatic incidents which might have furnished food for conversation a few months

before were at an end. Anything was better than nothing however, and when it appeared that Miss Adam had been lately abroad, and could tell in a quiet way a little about foreign feeling on the subject, as it had come beneath her own notice, he held her to the subject unrelentingly.

"She did get a dose of it," laughed Kitty aside to her sisters, when at length the dreary meal was over. "How awful it will be if we are to have this sort of thing every day. I do hate war talk. Not that I should mind if Major Everest——"

"What do you know about Major Everest?" said Gwen, quickly.

"Only what Daisy Curle tells me. I wish I knew more, but Daisy takes care of that,"—with a significant smile.

"Beatrice did not even know he was there," said Gwen, looking at her sister.

"I never said I did not know he was there. I suppose I knew it as well as you. We have got an invalided soldier stopping down here to recruit, Miss Adam," said Beatrice, thus courteously including the latter in the conversation. "We all felt quite excited over him at first. But when we found he had only had enteric, and neither walked with a crutch nor had his arm in a sling, I am afraid our interest waned."

"He might have recovered more easily from wounds than from enteric, however," observed Miss Adam.

"If only she wouldn't make such sensible remarks," muttered Kitty. "I do hate sensible people." Then suddenly an idea occurred. "Look here," whispered she, eagerly, Miss Adam having gone to fetch her work, "we can't go on like this. Can't we wake her up? Can't we get her interested in anything? I don't believe she is half as stupid as she looks. She seems in a deadly fright

of us all; and of course it is horrid to be plumped down here in the middle of us, without even mother, who got her here, to take off the edge. She was quite good company—at least goodish—not actually good, but goodish-when she was alone with mother and me this afternoon. I started them gossiping; I wouldn't let them be grand and bookish. Beatrice, you overawe the poor soul, you are so raspingly polite to her. You did better yesterday."

"What do you propose to do now?"

"Jump down to her level, or else haul her up to ours. Tell her about things. Make fun with her. Be nice to her."

"I am willing. I think you are right. I did try to explain to her about Major Everest."

"I know, and all you got was a vile platitude about enteric. Besides, it is not him she will care about, but Miss Adam," jumping up, as the latter re-entered the room, "come and sit here, and we three will sit round and tell you all about ourselves. Let's each describe the other. That is to say, Beatrice will start with me, and Gwen will take Beatrice—no, I'll keep Beatrice for myself, no one but I can do her justice," with mischievous glee-" and besides, Gwen will be more merciful to my poor little sins. Don't you think it is a good plan, Miss Adam? You want to know us, don't you?"

"I want to know you," said Miss Adam, earnestly, "very much."

"Just as we are? With all the wrinkles and pimples? Or faked up like Alice Hughes's portraits?"

"Just as you are."

"Don't you think some of us would be the better for a little faking up?"—slyly.

Miss Adam smiled.

("She has really a wonderfully sweet smile." It was Beatrice who saw and noted what escaped her sisters.)

"Well, now, who's to begin, who's to begin?" cried Kitty, in a bustle. "Who's to be the first victim? Is it to be the eldest, or youngest? Gwen, it can't be you anyway, as you are only frog in the middle. It lies between me and Beatrice."

"And as you put 'me' first, according to your habit——"
But Kitty struck in ere Beatrice could finish her
sentence: "I'm willing. I have no qualms of modesty.
Gwen may do her worst on me. Now, Gwen."

"But what am I to say?" murmured Gwen, feebly.

"Say? Anything that comes into your head. Say the truth, and that can't be difficult; for you know," laughing, "that you never can tell the veriest suspicion of a lie without being found out. Gwen is an absolutely truthful person, Miss Adam. Oh, I forgot. She's not my one. I almost wish she were, I could hit her off so well. Don't you forget that I gave you that hint, when you come to doing her," to Beatrice.

Then all waited for Gwen.

"I suppose Kitty would be called amusing," said she solemnly, at last. A burst of merriment followed, in which even Miss Adam joined.

"You are, anyway; ha-ha-ha!" shrieked Kitty. "Gwen never sees a joke till she hears us all laughing. Even Beatrice—I can always work a joke into Beatrice, but it wanders aimlessly about inside Gwen."

"You see," Gwen appealed to Miss Adam, "that is the sort of girl she is. But stop, I can tell you one thing," her countenance brightening, "Kitty is both father's and mother's favourite daughter—what? Oh, I thought I was to say anything," perceiving general discomfiture, "Kitty said I was to tell the truth, and that is the truth," deprecatingly.

"And Miss Adam may as well hear it," said Beatrice. with an effort. "It was a little startling to have it said out like that, because one does not usually say aloud such things; but, after all, you meant no harm, dear."

"I am sorry, Beatrice."

Beatrice nodded: the blush which had suffused her cheek, betraying a painful emotion, faded; and she looked so gently and re-assuringly at the offender that it surprised neither Gwen nor Kitty to notice that the look cast upon herself by the fourth person of the group, was one of more warmth and interest than had yet been elicited from the phlegmatic Miss Adam.

("I said we should wake her up," internally commented Kitty.) "Well now; now, go on," cried she, aloud.

But Gwen had nothing more to say. "You're just a goose, and we all spoil you," she apostrophised her subject. "You get round people, and do things you shouldn't, and worry Beatrice and-and that's all."

"Well, you have cut me off short! Can't you say that I'm twenty years old, though I'm treated like fifteen, and that my birthday is on the 2nd of April, and was all but on the 1st, so that I just escaped being an April Fool-andthat my hair was cut off when I had scarlatina-"

"Apparently you had better describe yourself, as well as all of us," interposed Beatrice, dryly.

"Just you wait, my lady, till I come to you. There won't be many bones left of you to pick, when I've finished my dissection. Miss Adam, do you like this? Does it entertain you? We are doing it to entertain you. you know."

"At any rate, Miss Adam won't have much difficulty in understanding why you are treated like fifteen after it," observed Beatrice, in the same dry, but not unkindly, tone. She reproved and repressed Kitty from morning till night, but such admonitions fell like water off a duck's back. In reality she was rather entering into the spirit of the game. "Now do let me have a word," cried she. "Miss Adam, I am Gwen's portrait-painter, and I assure you in strictest confidence that she is the laziest person on the face of the earth,"

"Dear me, how can you say so?"—from Gwen.

"She is too lazy to do the very things she wants," proceeded Beatrice, unheeding. "You can put her off going anywhere—almost anywhere—by saying it is a fag, and not worth the trouble. She likes, that is to say, she would like, society——"

"Yes, I do. Oh, I do that," Gwen nodded approval.

"But if she has to fight to get it, she gives in, and grumbles."

"Because it is no use fighting. You know it is that, Beatrice."

"And grumbling is easier. If she were not afraid of getting fat, she would eat too much and walk too little. But she is very good-natured, and never minds being laughed at. There, I think that is Gwen."

"And I don't think I have come so badly off, after all," appended Gwen, complacently.

"Any questions to ask, Miss Adam?" put in Kitty.

"You have not told me each other's tastes and pursuits," said Miss Adam.

"Tastes and pursuits?" They looked at each other.

"I don't think we have those—exactly," faltered Kitty, perceiving no one else would speak. "We leave them to mother—that is, Beatrice reads, but I don't know if reading is a pursuit."

"We have not been sufficiently well educated," said Beatrice, and again a blush that told of a painful sensation tinged her cheek. "We have not had the advantages that we ought—I mean that some people have. Our parents thought that a resident governess—"

"Oh, don't let us go off on that tack," struck in Kitty. "Miss Adam, that is one of Beatrice's grievances, and Gwen and I don't care two straws about it. I daresay if we had been educated up to the skies we shouldn't have been any the wiser. We two wouldn't anyway. Beatrice, look here," with a sudden change of tone, "it's my turn for Beatrice now, I have waited long enough. Mayn't I begin?"—looking from one to the other.

"Yes, begin," said Beatrice, herself.

Kitty rose from her chair, and stood forward in the attitude of an orator. "Miss Beatrice Maynard, ahem! Ladies and—and Miss Adam. I am about to lay before you a faithful representation of the well-known and widely-feared Miss Maynard, eldest daughter and heiress of Sir Henry Maynard, Baronet, in the county of Somerset, England. Ladies-and Miss Adam-to look for Miss Maynard's age in Debrett would be a vain task, for it is not there; but I, her humble biographer, am in a position to inform you that she was born-stop, I don't know exactly when she was born-but anyhow, she was twenty-six last October, and she says she doesn't mind who knows it. She is tall and walks well; but she humps when she sits, and mother is always telling her so. She is fearfully energetic—that's why she thinks Gwen lazy. She boils all over to go to things and do things, and I must say it is rather hard on her that she can't-at her age. She doesn't understand managing people"—with a droll look—"or she would get her own way much more than she does; but she is awfully honourable and highminded (do be quiet, Beatrice, I'll balance it by saying something that you won't like, directly) and—and—now you've put me off, and I don't know where I was."

"I think you have said quite enough." Beatrice made a restive movement.

"No, I haven't. I'll say that you can be most awfully

disagreeable, and that when you are in one of your moods we all fight shy of you. But they don't last," continued the orator, addressing Miss Adam, who had carefully abstained from raising her eyes during the above, "and she generally bolts off to Daisy Curle when they are on, to work off the steam on her. It used to be the vicarage girls, but they fell flat after Daisy came. Besides, they were never much good. Look here," turning to her sisters, "don't you think we might include Daisy in this? I could make a good thing of Daisy; and Miss Adam would like to know about her as well as about us, considering she comes here so much, and has made a sort of place for herself in the family."

"Every one who does that is of interest to me," said Miss Adam; "and Mrs. Curle perhaps—I had heard of her before I came here."

"Had you? How funny! What did you hear? And who told you?"

"Kitty!" A frown from her eldest sister recalled Kitty's manners.

"I did not mean to be rude, Miss Adam; it was only in the excitement of the game."

Miss Adam smiled re-assurance. "Do say whatever you please to me, my dear. You are showing me the greatest kindness by being so frank; and it would be a poor return on my part if I were to be reserved and formal. Some friends of mine happened to meet Mrs. Curle at a foreign hotel, where she was wintering while her husband was on some business expedition; and when they heard I was coming here, they mentioned that she—I mean that he—that is to say that they were new residents in the neighbourhood."

"They came six months ago. Mr. Curle has retired from business, and there was a large house just built for a man who died, which suited him exactly: so——"

"So there they came, and there they are!" interjected Kitty, whom all her sister's rebukes could not cure of the habit of interruption the moment she thought another speaker spoke too long. "The Hollies is the name of the house, and that's all Miss Adam need know about it. It's only a mile off, and Beatrice goes there nearly every day."

"What did your friends say of Mrs. Curle, if you don't mind my asking?" interposed Gwen, politely. "Of course I only mean did they think her pretty and clever? She quite took us all by storm down here."

"I fancy they admired her very much." Miss Adam seemed to reflect a moment, and temper her reply with caution. "Some of them did, at any rate. She was quite a leader of the revels at the hotel; and hotels in the Riviera can be very gay-"

"Oh, you have been there? You know what they are like? Do tell us. Never mind the Curley-wurleys," struck in Kitty afresh; and the conversation wandered off to narratives with which our readers are probably too familiar to care for repetition.

It struck Beatrice, however, that, despite Miss Adam's apparent readiness to meet her and her sisters on any ground they chose, there was a something in both tone and look when Daisy Curle formed the topic of conversation, which seemed to indicate that she could have said more about her than she did.

Beatrice Maynard was a keen observer; she felt glad that Kitty had broken off the discussion of her friend; glad that she personally had not been appealed to for an opinion; and decided within herself that she would know Miss Adam better, and learn more what her judgment was worth, before paying any further heed to a vague impression of uneasy curiosity with which the remarks already made, few and guarded as they were, inspired her.

To her own secret and abiding mortification, for her

high spirit could ill brook the humiliating disclosure, she had more than once since coming to years of discretion been proved to have bestowed her affection and confidence on individuals who, if not precisely unworthy of, were at any rate inadequate to, the honour.

Disgusted with the vacuity of her own home, she had flown to discharge her battery of suppressed emotions and opinions elsewhere, and almost anywhere that was attainable sufficed.

The result had not been without its lesson; she was now wiser, and, though still impulsive, put a rein upon impulse.

Also she expected less in return.

If Daisy Curle now and then offended her, she did not burst with indignation, nor weep with vexation. She argued and reasoned with herself. Occasionally she found herself in the wrong. That delighted her. A generous mind is overjoyed to blame itself rather than the object of its affections.

"I am so stiff and prudish; it is my ignorance of the world that fills me with narrow prejudices and childish scruples. And then to try to teach others!" There was something infinitely pathetic about such self-contempt.

Be sure also that it was artfully fed and fostered by an extremely able and not over-scrupulous person to whom it was a source of much advantage.

"My dear Beatrice, you are so clever; but all the cleverness in the world won't help you if you have not the Je ne sais quoi of experience. There, I own I have the pull of you. One cannot go about as I have done, here, there and everywhere—although I am only two years older than you, dear—without getting thoroughly au fait with everything. One's wits do get sharpened; now, don't they?"

"Certainly." A grave assent, the assent of deliberate conviction.

"And whatever small talents one may possess—mine are very small, not to be compared to yours—oh, don't disclaim, I always speak the truth, however much to my own detriment—still when one makes the most of what one has, it does elevate one, now doesn't it?"

"I wish Mrs. Curle would not invariably end with a question," observed Lady Laura, once. "Some speakers have a trick of it; and it is irritating, as all tricks are."

Beatrice, however, thought little of tricks. "What do they matter?" And Lady Laura in her next letter to Augusta Kenyon descanted upon the indifference of the age to every form of good-breeding, and regretted to add that her own daughters despised it like the rest.

Beatrice now wondered if it were upon this point that Miss Adam's informants had been foolishly sensitive when in contact with Daisy Curle? Daisy was not immaculate, and with some people the veriest trifle was an insurmountable objection. She resolved to take her own time, and clear up the matter in her own way.

CHAPTER III.

DAISY CURLE IS THE CYNOSURE OF EVERY EYE.

No one would have guessed that Miss Adam was in a fidget; Miss Adam never seemed to have anything to do or think of but Lady Laura's wishes—and, in a lesser degree, the wishes of the family. Lady Laura first—afterwards the rest.

It was a perfect December day, the first of its kind. A slight frost nipped the air, while sunlight made the landscape beautiful on every side, and revealed the farstretching valleys of Somersetshire, which had been hidden in mist for some weeks past.

It was also Sunday; and a more than ordinary stillness prevailed. Carts and waggons remained in their sheds throughout the peaceful hours of rest, and the snort of the flying train was only heard at rare intervals.

"I shall enjoy my walk," thought Miss Adam.

This was the first occasion on which she had asked to go out by herself, if Lady Laura could spare her; and as she had suggested a time during which her ladyship usually indulged in a nap, fatigued by the morning church-going and luncheon-dinner—to which old-fashioned regime the Maynard household adhered—the request was granted with gracious alacrity.

But it seemed as if the very fact that she was wanted out of the way, unconsciously retarded Lady Laura's movements.

As a rule she retired directly after quitting the dinnertable—even walking straight upstairs from the diningroom door; but on the present occasion, there was a book to be recommended for Miss Adam's perusal; then a passage to be found in the book; next, Lady Laura had dropped her handkerchief, and when the handkerchief was brought to her she was talking, and received it absently, still full of her topic. She sauntered to the garden door, observed on the beauty of the day, and inquired in which direction Miss Adam proposed to turn her steps? There was a path—if it were dry enough which would lead her to a point whence a particularly fine view could be obtained; but, to be sure, there was an equally fine view in an opposite direction, with a better road, and lanes were not always desirable for solitary walkers on Sundays. Idlers were about, and sometimes they were rough, unmannerly men; it might not be pleasant for Miss Adam.

Miss Adam acquiesced, and would keep to the more frequented places.

But on the main road she might encounter tramps. Lady Laura was obliged to warn her against the tramps, who invariably made Sunday a day of pilgrimage from one workhouse to another; and unluckily there were two of those undesirable residences in the vicinity, while Maynard Towers lay almost midway between the two.

That settled the high road. Miss Adam owned to a horror of tramps, and assured her patroness she would confine herself strictly to the grounds of the castle, which afforded ample scope for her walking powers.

As she spoke, the meek little woman glanced at the clock. It was but a glance, unaccompanied by the faintest sigh of impatience; and, as we have said, no one would have suspected the quick pulsation in the veins which were so completely under control, that Miss Adam's voice was even more mild and measured than usual when at last she took it upon herself to suggest that, if Lady

Laura required nothing more at present, perhaps it would be as well to put on her bonnet? And in exactly three minutes from the time of receiving permission, Miss Adam, accounted at every point, was off.

She was in terror lest some one should offer to accompany her. Not Beatrice, who was safely disposed of at the village Sunday school; but Gwen, who was yawning over a book in the library, or Kitty, who was roaming about the rooms wondering what she should do next. Kitty's voice was actually heard within the doorway, as the fugitive—holding her skirts together, and treading nowhere save on the thick carpeting or the rugs which bestrewed the polished floor, lest her footfall, light as it was, should make a sound—passed through the large central hall. If Kitty caught her, she was undone.

Not till the house itself was left behind, and she had plunged between the holly hedges which led to the shrubbery behind, did she feel safe.

But why all this terror and secrecy? Miss Adam going for a stroll, with an hour or two of leisure before her, and with only the ostensible object of exploring the beauties of the park, and invigorating her system by a little healthful exercise, surely needed not to be perturbed by the possible offer of a companion, even though solitude might be preferable? She might not want Kitty, but why be afraid of Kitty?

Miss Adam had a purpose in view, with which the latter's presence would have seriously interfered—to be correct, Kitty's going would have altogether prevented its accomplishment.

Miss Adam could wait patiently for her chance—but when the chance came she was not a woman to let it slip; and in the pocket of her plain black dress there lay a letter which told her that, baulked of this opportunity, she might not soon have another. She resolved not to be baulked.

And now all is safe, and she patters along the wooded path—the same by which Beatrice invariably wends her way to and from visiting her friend Daisy Curle—and presently quitting it (instructed by Beatrice herself, who was great upon landmarks), she turns up a sharp and narrow track, rougher and more frost-bitten than the lower pathway.

Here Miss Adam winces a little; for both earth and pebbles are hard, and hurt through her very slightly made London boots, too thin for such wear. "She do have beautiful boots," has already been remarked in the servants' hall, not without surprise; for it seems odd that so plainly dressed a person, whose other accoutrements are also in keeping with her subordinate position, should have finer and more perfectly shaped boots than any one else in the house.

Beatrice had suggested an order to the village maker who supplied herself and her sisters with stout and serviceable footgear; but Miss Adam modestly demurred. She was not sure that she wanted anything of the kind at present; and, picturing a scanty purse, the girls acquiesced at once.

But now, "Oh, dear me, I shall have to get a pair of horrid things, if I am not to be cut in pieces," inwardly groans our unfortunate pedestrian, "and thick, clumsy boots are my detestation". N. B.—She has a neat and shapely foot, and knows it.

Presently she begins to look before and behind. Apparently she is looking for some one, and equally apparent it is that the some one is not there.

"The graceless scamp!" mutters Miss Adam—(what words from a humble lady companion!)—"I shall never forgive him if he is not there before me; and Houston was always easily put off. I suppose that little minx has—ha? is that he?"—eagerly peering through some

interlacing boughs. "It could be no one else, at this place, and hour. But Lady Laura said the woods were full of sweethearts—it is Houston!" A sigh of relief.

"And now for a merry meeting!"—and a slow smile overspreads the little elderly lady's features, and she pulls out the strings of her bonnet—a veritable bonnet, not a fashionable make-believe—and gives her mantle a pull forward on her shoulders, feeling as though testing her armour for a coming struggle.

The figure on the heights above turns sharply round as Houston Everest becomes aware of a rustling in the woods behind, for hitherto he has been facing the open country, and with all the tranquillity of a man to whom the coming interview is of very minor importance, indulging in a cigar.

But the cigar drops from between his fingers.

"Good Heavens! What is the meaning of this?" The person he was expecting to see was indeed a woman well on in years, but still comely, richly attired, attractive to the eye, what he would have termed "Presentable"—the form which approached startled and bewildered him.

Was it—could it be his aunt Emmie? Aunt Emmie was the daintiest of dainty ladies; her still beautiful hair, carefully arrayed by a skilful hand, was wont to frame to admiration her pretty little face—he called her "A bit of Dresden china," when comparing her to his other relations.

Dresden china, indeed! No china of any known kind or quality ever was formed to resemble the little shabbily-clad apparition; and as for the hair, where was it? What an awful bonnet! A bonnet such as poor bodies wear. And a mantle, a beaded horror of a mantle, fit for a village school-mistress!

In mute consternation, not unmingled with disgust, he realised nevertheless that this was the person he had

come to meet, and that it behoved him, whatever his feelings, to approach and greet her.

"I am sorry to have kept you waiting," said Miss Adam, demurely.

"Oh, it's no matter," murmured he. Then suddenly, with a burst, "But my dear aunt!" Here a look spoke volumes.

"Yes, I understand. Pray, Houston, do not expire before my eyes. It would be so awkward up here with no one to carry you down to civilisation but myself. Bear up, my dear nephew; play the man."

The man grinned. "You always had a sense of humour," said he; "but upon my word, this is the first time I knew you had a taste for masquerading. I—if any one had told me this was you," his eye running over her from point to point, "I should have said, 'Go to Putney'."

"A very vulgar expression, sir. I beg you will say nothing of the kind in relation to me."

Here Everest laughed outright. "You do look comical. The hair's the worst. What have you done with it?"—trying to peer round and discover. "By Jove!" with a shout, "I believe it's a wig! A wig! And on the top of your own beautiful white hair——"

"Flatterer, peace." Then, confidentially, "You have no conception how hot it is, Houston; I am nearly baked beneath it, but I do think it is a good one. I went to Clarkson, for those theatrical people are better than any, and paid ten guineas. Would you know it? I mean would you have known it, if you had not known me?"

"Would never have spotted it for a moment. But it's not only the wig, it's the—the altogether. The whole make-up is perfect for the *rôle* of a needy female."

"Or lady companion?"

"That's it. You look the part to the life. What's more, I believe you could play it."

"I am—ahem—playing it," said Miss Adam, looking at him. It amused her intensely to see amazement and perplexity again overspread his countenance, and she would fain have kept him a little longer on the tenter-hooks, but time was passing.

"You don't invite me to sit down, Houston; despite the fact that my poor feet are bruised and sore from clambering up this abominable rough mountain track—Oh, don't interrupt; let me call it a 'Mountain track' if I like; it is as tormenting and tiring as one, at any rate,—and I may as well rest myself before clambering down again. This dirty seat is not absolutely rotten, I suppose?"—regarding with fastidious disdain a rural bench, which looked as if it had withstood, and but ill withstood, many a winter storm. "It won't hurt these clothes, at least," proceeded the lady, seating herself on the edge, "and if the damp gives me rheumatism, I shall lay it at your door, you tiresome boy. What do you mean by interfering with me in this manner, and giving me all this trouble?"

"I am really at a loss to understand your meaning, dear aunt. The seat is really damp, though; sit on the corner of my coat;" and he spread it out, and drew her on to it. "Now go on," continued he, encouragingly.

"You are rather nice in spite of your tiresomeness, Houston."

"Am I? But suppose you proceed to explain the tiresomeness? You and I have always been jolly good friends, and I haven't forgotten what you did once——"

"Never mind, never mind"—hastily. "Let it be 'Jolly good friends' and I am content; and it was because we were that—and are—that I wrote to you yesterday. I should not have dared to take any of my other relations into confidence."

- "All right. Now for the confidence."
- "I have come down to this part of the world for a purpose of my own, and as it was impossible for me to accomplish this purpose in my proper person, I was forced to assume a disguise. Lady Laura Maynard wanted a companion-"
 - "Aha?"
 - "It struck me that I could fill the post——"
 - "And dress it. To the life."
- "Of course I had to dress it; and took the greatest pains to be correct in every detail. Besides, it was a disguise. No one whom I am ever likely to meet at Maynard Towers must be permitted to recognise me. Luckily. I am not a well-known person, not a photographer's beauty," with a smile, "and I fancy I have sufficiently eclipsed the very small amount of looks I still possess-"
- "Draw it mild, dear aunt, you are an uncommonly charming woman, and quite aware of the fact."
- "You are an uncommonly cunning nephew, and play upon the charming woman's weakness-or think you do. But, seriously, what should I have done if I had suddenly encountered you face to face, and you had betraved me?"
- "Can't think," said he, succinctly. "The game would have been up, that's all,"
- "And it must not be up; it is not yet played; indeed it has hardly begun. I had to see you and bind you to secrecy: and I confess I was also rather anxious to find out what would be the effect of my present appearance upon you when taken unawares."
- "To tell the truth, aunt Emmie, the effect was singular. I thought you had gone mad."
- "But you knew me? I meant you not to know me." She was obviously a little disconcerted, but his next words restored serenity.

"Considering I had come to this retired spot for the express purpose of meeting you, and considering that in your note you hinted at some mystery—("though I confess I did not expect it to take such a rum form," in parenthesis)—I was in a manner prepared. I was warned to hold my tongue to the Curles, and to slip off here unbeknown to them and everybody, and here to wait till you came. If I had seen a she-bear approaching, I should still have hailed her as my dear and honoured ursine relation."

"That must satisfy me. It is next to impossible that I should be tested more closely than by you, so on the whole I ought to feel encouraged. And now, my dear Houston, I have very little more to say; you will of course respect my wishes; but are you—ahem—making any stay in the neighbourhood?"

"Oh, you needn't fear about that," said he; "whether I am here or not won't make any difference. I shan't trouble you."

"Yet you might, inadvertently."

He laughed. "Aunt Emmie, have I, or have I not, been on a secret service mission? And did I, or did I not, acquit myself to the satisfaction of those who employed me? Consider yourself as my chief on this occasion, and you shall have no cause to complain of indiscretion."

She nodded. "You come to Maynard Towers occasionally?"

"I have not been yet, but we are dining there tomorrow. You were just in time by fixing our little tryst for to-day. Oho!"—suddenly—"you knew this?"

"Yes; and if I had failed to-day, I could not have appeared at dinner to-morrow."

"You do appear at dinner? Isn't that rather unusual?"
So unusual that I was not prepared for it. But Lady

Laura has taken me up. If you were a woman you would know what that means; if you were acquainted with the domestic politics of the Maynard family, you would know better still."

"They are stupid sort of people, aren't they?" said he, indifferently.

Miss Adam threw him a keen glance. "That is what the Curles say."

"It is what most people say, I take it."

"Of that I am not quite so sure; however, you will judge for yourself. They are very kind to me; and to return to the dinner-party, I am expressly invited to be present. Such an invitation is like Royalty's command."

"They see you are no common person."

"Flattery again, thou wily one. But I own I have made myself so agreeable both to Lady Laura and the rest of the family—but especially to Lady Laura—that she sets a value on my powers of conversation far beyond what they merit. I entertain her—which few people do, or care to do. The poor thing is not accustomed to being amused and interested-"

"Mrs. Curle says she is a deadly bore."

Miss Adam's face was expressive.

"Oh, I assure you Daisy Curle knows what a bore is. She is an uncommonly nice, bright little woman, and has a horror of stick-in-the-mud grandees,"

"How comes it that she makes a friend of Beatrice?" He shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, I must go," said Miss Adam, rising and picking up her skirts, "I must endure the tortures of that stony little path again; but you may give me your arm down this very steep bit. We can part at the bottom of the hill. Now, my dear Houston, I can trust you?"

"To the death. But I say," laughing, "you won't try

me too far to-morrow night? You won't be more absurd than you can help?"

Miss Adam, however, would promise nothing. It might be necessary to be extremely absurd rather than act out of character, and she certainly should not take her nephew's feelings into consideration. All he had to do was to keep quiet, and he could surely do that. Somewhat piqued by her tone, he repeated his former assurance, and the two separated without anything further of importance passing between them.

Houston Everest was a born soldier; shrewd, straight-forward, somewhat stern and unsympathetic with men, wax in the hands of women. From earliest years he had had a hard life, the life of a neglected, uncared-for child, whom nobody wanted, his parents least of all. Their home lay in the Far East, and at the age when boys have to be sent home for education, he had left them, never again to see either. Both died whilst he was yet in his teens; and his schooldays finished, he had at once begun a military career, to which thenceforth all his energies were devoted. Between good luck and perseverance—favoured also by the war in South Africa, which broke out at a critical moment as regarded his promotion—he had now fair hopes of soon succeeding to the command of his regiment.

If only he could be thoroughly "fit" before it came home! That was the burden of his daily thoughts and nightly dreams. Was there anything he could do or leave undone to restore health and foster strength? For he had been bad, very bad; he had seen and felt the shadow of the Valley of Death; and only the doctor and nurse knew how little they had expected on one fateful night that he would see the light of another dawn.

He was sent home looking a wreck.

"But so interesting," confided little Mrs. Curle, to an

audience gathered round her on the verandah of a foreign hotel. "I am longing to take him in hand," proceeded she; "he seems to have no one to be kind to him."

Within a few days' time she was being very kind.

And she was perfectly honest so far as her lights went. To attach Everest to her train, to take possession of him and fuss over him, and have him looked upon as her friend and admirer, constituted the summit of her desires.

She was rich, and he was poor; she made him free of her beautiful sitting-room, with its balcony, easy chairs, and peaceful seclusion from the common herd. She was sure he ought not to be forever in public; the constant noise and commotion of the great hall below *must* be bad for an invalid; and even in the garden there was no rest, no quiet.

Then there were drives, with Willie on the box. Willie was perfectly satisfied, preferring his altitude and his pipe to a back-seat and companionship within the carriage. He and Everest were very good friends; and, on the return of the Curles to England, the husband was as ready as the wife to proffer the hospitality of the new home of which they were about to take possession.

Everest, however, did not jump at the invitation. He was grateful and obliged, but his movements were uncertain.

In secret he was not a little worried in that his doctor would not pronounce him again fit for active duty, and his whole soul was at the front. Even while thanking the Curles at the door of their departing train, he was obviously absent-minded, and Daisy had been rallied by her husband on the subject thereafter. "You couldn't get him to Somersetshire," chuckled he.

So that naturally it became an object of importance with her to turn the tables on Willie. Willie meant to hint that she was growing old and ugly—and truth to

tell, there were girls at the hotel who now and then made her feel so, and feel desperately afraid lest Everest should think so—but if he would only come to The Hollies, and be as nice and helpless and dejected there as he was at Lucerne, she would have a good time.

Everest was very pliable as concerned everything but his profession. Once convinced that for the present he must give up all thoughts of rejoining, he would let himself be handled submissively, and might even be warmed up to more semblance of ardour than he had yet shown.

She rejoiced greatly when Everest wrote that he was coming. The pertinacity of the Curles had prevailed, but perhaps it was effectively aided by the fact that he had not many houses open to him at the time, nor, indeed, at any time. He had but few acquaintances; and such as they were, they could not offer any prospect of shooting, and he really did long for a little shooting; since it was fated that he should not hear the singing of the bullets on the veldt, it seemed to him that the whirr of a pheasant's wing in old England would be the best compensation that offered.

It was awfully good of the Curles too, he reflected, to press a mere hotel acquaintance, a poor sick ass like himself, to make their house his headquarters, and give them an indefinitely prolonged visit. "We don't want you just for a few days, but to come and be nursed, and lead a quiet life with us two," wrote Daisy.

She wrote a large, bad hand, but her pen flowed easily, and there could be no doubt of the warmth and sincerity expressed in every syllable. "Willie would have written, but he says I can do it better, and that you are to understand this comes from us both." All of which was perfectly true, and was personally endorsed by the said Willie in due time.

Everest was thus established at The Hollies, and his

aunt, to whom he had written on arriving in England, apprised of the fact. This aunt was now almost his only surviving relation, and he was fond of her, and told her all his movements. While still abroad he had written about the Curles, and the probability that he would spend a part of his leave beneath their roof,—and when the two met in London he was on his way to Somersetshire.

At that time nothing more was said, so that a note received by post the day before the interview above narrated, was a surprise; but Everest was a soldier and took surprises philosophically. He kept his own counsel, and obeyed the lady's summons. We know the rest.

"We hardly ever give dinner-parties," said Kitty, to whom the prospect of the forthcoming one was exhilarating, and she had two or three times already made the same remark for Miss Adam's benefit, "so you are lucky to come in for one so soon. We had the last for the partridges; this is for the pheasants. And of course there are woodcock and wild duck now as well. That is what father and mother think of, Miss Adam."

"They are important items in the bill of fare, certainly," said Miss Adam.

"I suppose they are—to old people. Old people are so greedy. I can't think how they can care; I never mind what the food is when I go out."

"But when you give the food, you would wish it to be suitable?"

"Well; but anything's suitable. People can always get what they like by buying it. I can't think why there should be a fuss about what there is in the larder. However, that's our way, and nothing will alter it. I am thankful to get the party at any price."

"I daresay."

"Do you not feel at all excited, Miss Adam?" ("Of course she does, and she's only pretending," reflected the

speaker, inwardly. "A regular solemn dinner-party in a new place must be fun to her, and she might as well own it.") "Miss Adam?"—aloud.

"Well, my dear."

"What are you going to wear? It's full dress, you know."

"I have got a black silk, cut square in the neck," said Miss Adam, trying to evince a modest satisfaction with an abominably ill-made garment, the work of a cheap dressmaker, which she knew would cause her agonies to have to don on the morrow. "I think it will look quite nice with a lace fichu. A little bit of old lace I had from my mother," she appended, hastily.

"Old lace makes anything look nice. And you shall have a chrysanthemum or some other flower, to brighten it up."

"Thank you," said poor Miss Adam, ruefully. ("That will just about complete my disfigurement," thought she.)

But every one else congratulated Lady Laura's companion on her appearance, as each severally entered the drawing-room on the following evening.

First came Lady Laura, who had a punctual maid; and who now, resplendent in black velvet and diamonds, showed, what she seldom did, that she was still a pretty and could be a pleasant-looking woman.

Her ladyship, who has not hitherto been presented in her most favourable light to our readers, had nevertheless her good points, and in her own house, and when entertaining her own guests, could show them. Miss Adam's being already dressed and down was only what she should have expected from Miss Adam, who seemed by instinct to do the right thing; and, elated by this fresh instance of her own wisdom in securing such a rara avis, and moved also by other and kindlier feelings, she exclaimed with an eagerness and sincerity that did more credit to her heart than to her taste—"Do let me tell

you how well you look. Such a nice dress, and such a pretty collarette. One can get those things so much better in London than anywhere else;"-she wound up with what she felt to be discerning and critical approval.

The lace was priceless, and Miss Adam saw that it was supposed to have been bought in Oxford Street!

But she had schooled herself diligently while dressing. "I am so glad you approve of me. Lady Laura."

"I do indeed. And that handsome old brooch! A relic, I suppose?"

It was a vile shell cameo, and it had been purchased in Oxford Street, with a special view to a contingency such as the present.

"I thought it made a finish," said Miss Adam.

She herself did not venture, except by looks, to reciprocate admiration; but as she honestly commended in her heart the matronly appearance of her hostess, and as she permitted this to be apparent in her countenance. reserve was even more effective than speech. Laura could appreciate good manners, whatever might be her ignorance of dress.

Then came in Sir Henry. "Ha! I am not the first? Well, ladies, am I permitted to-you look charming, my dear." to his wife-"haven't seen you look so like yourself for a long time: and Miss Adam—but I suppose it is not polite to make remarks,"—with an air that implied what these would have been.

Beatrice. Gwen, and Kitty each had her word; each a re-assuring whisper; and in Kitty's case there was readjustment of the floral decoration, which was submitted to in patience; but only one person in the room, when the company was assembled, knew that a certain meek little person in the background had obliterated every trace of her remaining comeliness beneath a voluntary mask, and that it had irked her spirit sore to do so.

Major Everest was not introduced to Miss Adam. Naturally there was no occasion for his being so, and, after one glance in her direction, he steadily averted his eyes from the place where she sat.

At first he was half afraid that this nonsensical whim of his aunt's might be troublesome; if she were to be opposite him at the dinner-table, for instance, it would be awkward; he would be under a constant sense of restraint; he would be unable to help thinking of her, and wondering what she was about. But, as soon as he found himself seated out of her range, and by peering down the table discerned that he was out of ear-shot also, his spirits revived

He even told himself that it was rather a joke, and resolved to reap some of the benefit of the joke for his own amusement. He would be cautious, however, and bide his time; it must be his partner and not he who should introduce the subject to Miss Adam; and meantime another subject was started.

Previously Everest had told the Curles that he was no good at a dinner-party, to which Daisy had rejoined: "You must not expect those girls to help you out," with ill-concealed satisfaction.

He had inquired if it were certain that he should be at the mercy of the girls?

"You can hardly expect to escape them all," laughed she. She then decided that Beatrice would fall to his lot during dinner, and gave him a foretaste of her friend's companionship which was not precisely reassuring.

A good girl; but oh, so heavy in hand! As to looks, tolerable. Gwen, the second sister, was distinctly pretty, and people called Beatrice handsome because she was Miss Maynard; but with the exception of a pair of fine eyes, she had not a feature in her face. At least, well, her mouth was not badly shaped, but too large; and her chin—" Spare me her chin," cried he.

"You are sure to have Beatrice," proceeded his informant, confidently. "I feel it in my bones that you will; and it is rather hard on you, for you might have had some fun with Kitty; but Kitty will either have the Oldcastle boy, or no one. There will be five and twenty or thirty people at dinner, and everything on a grand scale."

"I am prepared for the worst," quoth he, with resignation. Strange to say, he had not sat down to a formal, stately dinner-party of the old-fashioned sort for some years, and, despite evil forebodings, now found himself looking about and rather enjoying the scene. The flowers, the lights, the glittering plate and gay dresses of the ladies pleased his eye, and insensibly raised his spirits. Outside there was a dreary winter night, with snowflakes falling; for the bright frost of the day before had heralded a change of weather, and a blast of chill air made a susceptible semi-invalid shiver on emerging from a warm carriage at the door of the mansion—but within all was comfort.

Everest was hungry too, after some hours of tramping the woods, and the soup was good. He took a mouthful of sherry, and addressed himself to conversation.

"That's the wounded hero," confided Kitty to her partner, the Oldcastle boy, as accurately foretold by Daisy Curle, "at least, if he wasn't wounded, he might have been; for he was through all the big things, and got something or other which sent him home on sick-leave. I think he looks rather nice,"—eyeing Everest with a dawning interest that was not shared by her partner.

"The whole country is full of those chaps," observed he; "you can't go anywhere without meeting them."

"You might have brought one as well as the Curles then," retorted she, with spirit.

"For that matter," Master Anthony Oldcastle tossed

up his chin, "we thought you would prefer a Fellow of All Souls. Not so cheap."

"A Fellow of All Souls? Is that a Senior Wrangler—what are you laughing at? Well, I don't know; I never said I did. You Oxford boys think all the world knows about your Fellows and creatures——"piqued by his merriment.

"All the world knows that Senior Wranglers are at the other shop. I say, I wouldn't let it out if I were as green as you, Kitty. If you had brothers——"

"Which I haven't, but I'll tell you who is going to Oxford, and you can make friends with him there if you like, and that's our chemist's son. You will have to keep clear of our village, if you don't want to know Bob Hoggit after this."

"I have no objection to knowing Bob Hoggit," quoth he, loftily. "Not that it is absolutely certain that I shall ever set eyes upon him. Have you any idea how many colleges there are, and how many fellows at each of them?"

"You seem to think so much of a 'Fellow' of any kind, that I conclude they are few and far between. What's your Fellow's name?"

"Thomson. And he is one of the first men at Oxford"—shortly.

"What does he wear spectacles for?"

"For the same reason that other people do, I suppose. Look out, you're stealing my bread, Kitty, you used not to be so cantankerous——" for the two had played in the nursery together.

"Oh yes, I used," laughed she, now. "Always, when you gave yourself airs. Why can't you be interested in my war man? I am sure he is fifty times better looking than your Fellow man, and he doesn't look stupid either. What's more, he can't be stupid," eagerly, "for the Curles say he has had quite a career already——"

"What has he done? D.S.O. I suppose?"—contemptuously.

"If you mean A.D.C. he is, he was, he acted that to—to I forget who, but Daisy Curle knows; I heard her telling mother; and if I had known he was going to turn out like that," nodding down the table, "I should have listened more carefully—but I thought majors were always fat old horrors."

"You ought to know better by this time; it's nothing to be a major. I tell you they are all over the place."

"I wish they would come our way then. Look at Beatrice; she has quite waked up, and it takes something to wake Beatrice up. She did not want to have Major Everest at dinner; she has some stupid idea that we are all such ignoramuses that no one cares to talk to us; and she tried to persuade mother to give him to Miss Brabant—but mother just wouldn't. She said Major Everest ought to go before little Tommy Tallerman—Tom Tallowcandle, as father calls him. I don't think Beatrice need have worried herself,"—with a slight accent of discontent.

Indeed Beatrice had no air of being worried. Instead, her countenance wore a glow of animation it seldom exhibited, and her large, dark eyes sparkled as she talked. Obviously she had found something to talk about, some subject which so roused her interest and sympathies that self was forgotten; even while keenly attending directly her companion spoke, her lips were parted for reply. The two appeared to be engrossed with each other.

"Been to the meets lately, Miss Maynard?" It was innocent little Tommy, wickedly nicknamed "Tallow-candle," who, in the dulcet tones which made Sir Henry affirm that tallow would not melt in his mouth, at length accosted his left-hand neighbour.

He had waited half through dinner for an opportunity, and could wait no longer.

No—yes,—yes, they had been to one meet, but Miss Maynard could not recollect which. It was some time ago.

"Last Tuesday fortnight, wasn't it?" said he. "I heard you went with the Curles. I was up in Town myself. Fact is, I thought there was going to be a frost—"

"There is one beginning now, I believe. Major Everest says the thermometer has been falling all day."

"Is that Everest?" His voice sank confidentially. "I was wondering if it were? Willie Curle told me they were bringing him to-night. I was asked to shoot with him and Curle on Saturday, but we had some guns out ourselves. I wonder if he would care to join our party on Wednesday?"—peering before and behind, as if to glean information from the back of Everest's neck, his head being turned the other way.

Beatrice had no suggestion to offer.

"Been telling you about his soldiering, I suppose," proceeded Tommy, with the ease of an old friend; "Curle says he is rampant to be at it again; but once you get bowled over by typhoid—or enteric, as they call it now—you don't know when you'll be on your feet again. A cousin of mine——"

"Major Everest is expecting to go out again early in the year."

"Is he? He may, or he mayn't. He looks fit enough; but looks don't go for much. There's my cousin"—but his slow, soft drawl was insupportable; she shivered with impatience; what was his cousin, dead or alive, to her? Was she to be victimised by one of the dullest of dull country squires, because his other neighbour had dropped

him—or rather had never properly annexed him—for she now recalled that Tommy had been almost mute hitherto? It was Clara Wilde, the M.F.H.'s daughter, who by rights should have been looking after Tommy, one of the best subscribers to the hunt; and Clara was ready enough to follow his lead in the field—Beatrice boldly leaned across and addressed the lady.

"Clara, have you asked Mr. Tallerman about that new sporting paper you showed me at Quayle's the other day? I told her you would know if it were worth advertising in?"—to him. "Clara, you explain."

Thus Clara was caught and she herself free.

And it chanced that Everest was also free at the moment, and that simultaneously they turned to one another, and their eyes met.

Hum-hum, went the talk round the table; every tongue was now well loosened, and a steady volume of sound, not to be called an uproar, but sufficiently loud and cheerful to show that the party was a success, filled the room.

Sir Henry now thought he would not mind giving just such another any day. He always rose to the occasion, ate, drank, enjoyed himself and thought the same—till next time came. Then, only the stern dictates of noblesse oblige extorted permission for the invitations to be sent.

Lady Laura thought herself also all that was genial and hospitable. With her two portly white waistcoats on either side, with their ready attention the moment she spoke, and their palpable preference for her conversation over that of their neighbours on the other side, she was in no danger of being rubbed the wrong way, and was heard laughing quite outrageously—as Kitty told her afterwards.

Lady Laura said she could not help it; Mr. Wilde was so amusing.

Lady Laura's daughters were a long way from the head of the table. Gwen sat nearest her mother; and, the likeness between the two being noted by one old fellow and resented by the other ("Yet not in an aggressive way, as if it were a compliment to me that I should be like my daughter," inwardly commented her ladyship), she was graciously pleased to observe Gwen merry, and making others merry.

Certainly daughters, in their place, were desirable. It was only when they were thrust out of it—but happily the reflection was momentary and passed.

Still, Lady Laura did not know that she should bring any party to the Hunt Ball. The Hunt Ball was an annual grievance; and she hated January because she had then invariably to struggle with it. For herself she never went, and that ought to have sufficed the county; but somehow it did not, and Sir Henry, who had old traditions to consider, thought the family ought to be represented.

"I suppose you are coming to the ball, Lady Laura?"
There! That was the first ominous note. A slight cloud responded to it on Lady Laura's brow, but she was in a manner prepared. She really did not know, was the date fixed?

"Oh, bless me, yes," rejoined Mr. Wilde, to whom the ball was of as much importance as to the prettiest débutante.
"The fifteenth. We are depending on you for a large contingent."

This was better. Depending on her? For one brief interval Lady Laura thought she would, almost thought she would brisk up and go, sail into the ballroom at the head of her party, seat herself on the daïs, and be led out to supper by her present interlocutor—but she just did not commit herself. "I have not yet thought about it," observed she, graciously—and then Mr. Wilde made the usual mistake. "If you don't care to turn out, my wife

would be only too glad to chaperon the young ladies, of course."

Unlucky man! The ball was now as nearly doomed as before it had been on the point of being carried—with reference to Maynard Towers.

"We could not think of adding to Mrs. Wilde's cares," said Lady Laura, very stiffly. "She will have quite enough to think about without the charge of other people's children."

"Children?" The jolly gentleman laughed, and then just as inadvertently as he had stumbled he retrieved himself: "'Pon my word, I don't wonder at your calling them 'Children,' when it seems but yesterday you and Maynard came to our house as bride and bridegroom. I see you now, and the claret spilt on your wedding gown! You said never a word, but my wife told me it was an awful business. And that was twenty years ago, was it? What? Oh, not more—it can't be more. I'm hanged if I believe it is as much. To look at you—come, Lady Laura, put in an appearance at our ball, and half the county will back me up in declaring it can't be as much."

And this was how Lady Laura was eventually won to promise that she would think about the ball.

"Did you hear? Did you hear that?" whispered Kitty to Gwen, as they followed the other ladies to the drawing-room. "Miss Adam," falling back upon her next, "you were near mother, how did it come about? All I heard was: 'I shall remind you of your promise at the ball, Lady Laura,' in the Master's stentorian tones. What led to it? How did he manage it?"

"Ask your mother herself. And Kitty——" Miss Adam hesitated.

" Well?"

"Be careful how you do it, dear. It would be such a pity——"

"I know." And a little surprised Kitty flew off.

She knew, but how did Miss Adam know? Miss Adam had only been ten days in the house, and could hardly be supposed to be cognisant of the idiosyncrasies of Lady Laura's peculiar temperament; yet certainly there was perception and something more in her tone. There was anxiety and warning. "She knows it's skating over thin ice," reflected Kitty.

As she really did understand her business however, and, moreover, had a certain sympathy with her mother which had helped her on many a former occasion, she was presently so far successful as to be bubbling over with delight. And next she showed her skill.

"Mother's going to the ball; mother is going to have a party for the ball," she disseminated through the circle, standing by Lady Laura's side, her hand within the matron's fair plump rounded arm, her accents attributing such importance to the announcement that, however Beatrice might blush with vexation, the rest of the ladies could do no other than express gratitude and pleasure.

"That is good of you, dear Lady Laura; that will help the ball."

All Lady Laura's modesty was not equal to supposing she could not make or mar a festivity by her presence or absence; but, without considering that she had now for some years withdrawn the light of her countenance from the one in question and that it had nevertheless survived, she was ready to be flattered into believing that upon her favour depended its very existence.

"It seems I am expected to go," she said. "Mr. Wilde is so good a Master, that we all ought to do what we can to help him,"—smiling around.

Late in the day as it was to think of that, the person to whom this reflection might have presented itself the most vividly, for once did not curl her lip; Beatrice had experienced a momentary annoyance at Kitty's tone, condescending and exultant; but now she only looked earnestly at her mother, as if to ascertain whether the concession were to be taken at its full value or not, before joining quietly and pleasantly in the buzz of conversation to which it gave rise. A few hours before she would not have cared enough about the matter to give an opinion; now she wanted to go to the ball—what had wrought this change?

"Is he not charming? I am so glad you had a good talk with him," whispered Daisy Curle, presently. "I knew you two would get on well together. He is just your sort, Beatrice; and I did so hope your mother would arrange for you to have him at dinner. If Lady Laura had asked me, I should have said, 'Give him Beatrice'—but she thought it out for herself, and knew you would suit each other."

"You give my mother too much credit; there was not much thinking required; or if there were——"

"Well?"

"She did not trouble about it. Major Everest's position——"

"You fancy it was only that? No, no, my dear. I saw the maternal eye was upon you. She meant you to make yourself agreeable—and you did. Not that he is much of a parti; indeed, he is rather poor; but then he is of good family——"

"And you suppose my mother-"

"Mothers are mothers. Pray, my dear Beatrice, don't be so tiresome as to throw cold water on a most natural idea. If you will not believe me then, what about the ball? Did you ever go to the ball before? Not for years at any rate. And now Lady Laura at once and without hesitation gives in to it. I'll answer for it there is not a woman here who does not know why."

"They know what is absolutely false then; and you who know my mother—and me—ought to know better than to repeat it."

"Oh, my dear, you are too grand, too serious,"—laughing affectedly. "Why this tremendous indignation? And now you will snub poor Major Everest just to prove me in the wrong. You do cut off your nose to spite your face, you poor, dear, naughty Beatrice."

Hot as a flame, Beatrice turned from her.

But it was a heat which had to be concealed; and Miss Maynard, all the pleasant feelings of the previous hour obliterated by the rude touch laid upon them, moved with easy dignity and a perfectly disengaged air amongst her guests for the remainder of the evening.

When Everest drew near she turned aside, then paused, retraced her steps, and introduced him to some one else. When little Tommy Tallerman began to her about the ball, she knew nothing more about it than he did. She believed they were going—her tone conveyed she was to be dragged thither with a rope. Music was called for, and Daisy Curle had brought hers—but she appealed in vain to her friend for a selection.

Daisy skipped to the piano after that.

And she sang her best, the best of an unusually sweet voice, trained to the full extent of its powers.

"Bravo!" cried Sir Henry and the white waistcoats. "That's the kind of singing for me," said one to another. "Can understand that. None of your German fol-deroodles."

Mr. Wilde must have the good old song of the Hunt, which he himself had given the fair singer (as he had many a one before her), and Daisy with excellent fervour and spirit—nodding to all to join in the chorus too—did such justice to the somewhat jingling ballad that a loud clapping of hands ensued, and even Lady Laura tapped

the table with her fan. She did not know, none of them knew, how admirable the performance was in reality; but it took their fancy, and tickled their local pride.

Everest had withdrawn to the background; but though not within the applauding circle he was smiling and listening, as some one other than Beatrice Maynard saw. He was standing by Willie Curle; and both wore a satisfied air, as though the little woman at the piano, who looked so pretty and good-humoured, receiving compliments on every hand, in a manner belonged to both and did credit to both.

Daisy was in her very smartest and latest Paris frock, and Willie's diamonds glittered on her neck and arms.

But she wore an odd little brooch, too, that Willie had not given her, and that Everest protested was quite out of place amidst such splendour. It was only a quaint little curio he had picked up in the East, and he thought Mrs. Curle might like it for her collection; he had never dreamed of her having it set as an ornament.

In the corner where Daisy sat there was a blaze of effulgence from the additional lights on the piano, and these seemed to encircle her as a queen, so far did she eclipse in this moment of triumph every other woman in the room. A faint, very faint, sense of discontent stole into one fair bosom after another.

But they were powerless; even Lady Laura was powerless; she could not dethrone that shining, sparkling creature; she could not say aloud, "Come, we have had enough; now subside, and be only the ordinary little person you were before and will be again"—she could not break up the party; and she was just beginning to wonder what she *could* do, and to look round and realise her impotence, when something happened.

From a quarter most unexpected aid came. Miss Adam, unobserved by all, had made her way within the

charmed circle, and was busily arranging the scattered music on the piano.

Miss Adam was nobody, and Daisy took no notice of her. She was occupied with the gentlemen, her admirers. She moved mechanically to accord Lady Laura's companion room for her orderly endeavours, and turned her head, the smile still upon her lips, on hearing a voice in her ear. Perhaps she was being respectfully solicited to delight the company again? She was willing, late as it was.

But the next moment those who were looking on beheld an odd thing happen. Crimson from brow to chin—her very neck suffused by the sudden flush—her small be-jewelled hands, which had been prettily toying with handkerchief and fan, clenched in a gust of passion—the fair singer started to her feet, and turned upon her meek petitioner the look of a panther at bay.

Miss Adam picked up a piece of music which had fallen.

"Well, are we to have another?" cried Sir Henry's voice from the background. "Mrs. Curle, are we to have another? Pray don't get up. What? Oh you must."

"It—it is very late, Sir Henry." Mrs. Curle, stammering and faltering, could scarce, it seemed, articulate the words. The blood was dying out of her cheeks, but the look of rage and terror remained—an extraordinary look on such a face at such a moment. Daisy's bosom heaved beneath its sparkling corsage. All her efforts could not subdue her struggling breath.

"Late? Not a bit of it. The carriages have not been announced, but of course if you are tired," said he, pushing his way to her side, "we must not work the willing steed to death. I only hope we have not been too exacting already?" For now he perceived for the first time that something was amiss.

"Oh, no," murmured she, faintly.

"Take my arm. Come to the cooler part of the room; it is uncommonly hot over here. Curle, we have been working your wife too hard——"and she was led to a sofa.

But even Tommy Tallowcandle knew that it was not the heat nor the exertion, but something—some message perhaps from the arbitrary Lady Laura, transmitted through her humble companion—which caused the collapse of Mrs. William Curle,

"I say, that was too bad," muttered Tommy to the nearest auditor. "To send and shut her up before us all! It must have been done with pretty brutal plainness too: the poor little woman looked ready to sink into the earth."

Tony Oldcastle, however, only touched him on the elbow to be quiet.

When they were clear of the house, for they went off together, he explained his reticence. "You have to take care what you say in there," quoth he, jerking his thumb backwards; "there are too many of them to be safe, and that little Kitty hears everything."

"Eh? But I spoke in a whisper. They didn't hear, do you think?" responded Tallerman, with a look of alarm. "It's my beastly loud voice, you know."

"I didn't say they heard, but one never knows. Try one of mine,"—opening his cigar-case.

"Thanks. But what did you think of it? Wasn't it a shame?"

"The Maynards are always like that," said young Oldcastle, coolly. "They won't have any one overcrowing them in their own house. Yes, of course she got the tip to climb down, and equally of course she didn't like it."

"Who would? Daisy has a temper too. By Jove, how red she got!"

"Like a turkeycock. She won't sing again at Lady Laura's dinner-parties,"—and the two laughed.

The same idea prevailed in other quarters, and excited similar feelings. Even supposing that saucy little Mrs. Curle had been rather carried away by the intoxication of success, surely it was not for her hostess to put her down, and that so openly, so rudely. It was a breach of good manners unaccountable and unpardonable. It was going too far, whatever might be the relative positions of Lady Laura Maynard and the brewer's wife. One and all agreed that so unpleasant a termination of the evening was an offence to all assembled; and her ladyship, being held responsible for the same, might have felt her ears burn for days thereafter, had she been guilty as supposed.

But in truth Lady Laura was as innocent as a babe. She had sent no message; given Miss Adam no hint; was genuinely surprised and relieved when the situation, which had begun to try her patience, suddenly, and as it appeared to her easily and naturally, came to an end of itself. She was therefore quite complacent.

So was Sir Henry, who was profuse in his gratitude as he escorted his pretty little neighbour to her carriage. "Hope you won't be the worse for this?" said he. "Your singing helped us famously. It's a pity my girls don't do anything in that way." And he hummed a verse of the hunting-song as he went back to the drawing-room.

Miss Adam had disappeared, and he found Kitty regaling the rest with something about Miss Adam to which even Lady Laura was hearkening good-humouredly.

"It was she who stopped Daisy; it was something she said, but I don't know what. I only saw Daisy bounce up from the music-stool and glare at her, and turn red all over. She looked utterly dumbfoundered too, and hadn't a word to say."

"It is not like Miss Adam to be so gauche," said Lady Laura, but without any asperity. "I fancy, however, she divined that I had had enough of all that showing off, and usurping every one's attention. And Miss Adam is so very mindful of my feelings that her zeal may have a little overstepped her discretion. She would not know how to be diplomatic."

"It was rather cool of her, all the same," observed Gwen. Beatrice said nothing.

At another time she would have agreed with her sister; it was not for a humble dependent in Sir Henry's house to dictate, with whatever good intentions, to one of his guests; and that her own particular friend should be the person to be annoyed would have been an additional source of ire,—but to-night Miss Adam had rendered her a service, and she would not disown that service.

Throughout the singing she had held aloof, busying herself with the dowagers, who remained on sofas and ottomans in the centre of the large saloon. She was thus free from the necessity of joining in the applause or of standing by Daisy's side, where she was usually to be seen on such occasions.

She took pride in Daisy's singing; asserting that its high order of merit was not sufficiently appreciated in the neighbourhood,—yet on this occasion the drowsy whispers of old Lady Lull, and the nodding of Mrs. Wilde's head in front of her very eyes, were not resented. Daisy had made her very angry; spoilt her evening; and without seeming either to notice or to care, had thereafter soared aloft, the cynosure of every eye; gayer, more daring, more effective than Beatrice had ever before known her.

Surely such cold-blooded vanity, such selfish disregard of every one's feelings but her own were new in Daisy. Beatrice was wont to affirm that her friend had the warmest heart, the kindliest disposition; and would have been simple but for circumstances. "She cannot help being a woman of the world. It is not her fault that she knows things and people as they are, and not as they ought to be; Daisy cannot shut her eyes,"—she would cry. "But she often wishes she knew less than she does, and envies our ignorance and exclusiveness, saying they place us so far above her. But that is nonsense. It is only because Daisy is so fond of us all."

Much had hitherto been made of this fondness, and Beatrice felt sore to think it had failed at a pinch in the present instance.

It is true that Daisy now and then unwittingly jarred upon her. She might herself say things of her own people—say them, perhaps, in the heat of the moment, and because Daisy Curle was in a manner her own property, and not an old neighbour and hereditary acquaint-ance—but when she was met half-way, and more than half way, she was vaguely conscious of an inner protest.

Then she would argue the protest down, contending in her own mind that the fault, if fault there were, was hers, not Daisy's. "And it is my only chance of hearing the truth," she would tell herself. For, of course, if she betrayed distaste for plain speaking there would be an end of it—and she could not afford to make an end of it.

In all that had gone before, however, Beatrice had never been personally wounded; she had always been separated from her surroundings in her friend's criticisms—nay, their very poignancy was a covert flattery to herself. The case was different now.

Yet why different? What had been said that might not have been said a score of times and heard with indifference?

To insinuate that Lady Laura was a matchmaker for her daughter's benefit, or indeed for any one's benefit, was so absurdly wide of the mark, that at another time it would only have been amusing; in a special degree amusing, since it was Lady Laura's way to look black at every bachelor, old or young, eligible or ineligible, who cast sheep's eyes at her flock. To matrimony itself, the actual, practical bond, her ladyship might not object; but so well were her feelings regarding its preliminaries understood in the family, that Sir Henry himself never dared be jocular on the subject if she were present.

Such being the case, Beatrice ought only to have been diverted by Daisy Curle's mistake—and how comes it that she was not diverted?

Our readers can partially guess.

CHAPTER IV.

"THE GREAT BEATRICE HERSELF CONVEYED THE COMMAND."

"WILLIE, I want you."

"Eh!" said Willie, looking up from the hall to where his wife was ascending the staircase. He and Everest were preparing to turn into the smoking-room.

"I want you," repeated Daisy, peremptorily. "Don't sit up any longer to-night. You have smoked enough, and you are going to hunt to-morrow—oh, you aren't? Never mind, I want you now." And she rustled on.

"Look here," proceeded she, the obedient Willie having followed to her bedroom, and seen the maid dismissed, "what do you think made me stop singing to-night? I was in good voice, wasn't I? And everybody asked for more; and to save my life I couldn't have sung another note! Tell me before I go on, if—if there was anything to notice—if anything was said?"

"Anything said?" repeated he, stupidly.

"Did I make a fool of myself? Did people stare and wonder—quick?"—plucking at his coat-sleeve in her impatience. "You were there. You must have seen if there were anything to see. You are not quite blind, and you know well enough what I mean."

"But I don't know. 'Pon my honour, I know nothing. I have no notion what you are driving at."

"Did Major Everest, did he say nothing to you?"

"What about? You?"

"Of course, me. About my stopping like that, and-

and—oh, it was too provoking, and so diabolically cleverly done too. I had not a moment's preparation; but if you are sure, and you are sure, aren't you? that there was nothing to notice, at least nothing that any one did notice——"

"Give you my word there was nothing, Daisy. Poor little soul, what is all this about? You look regularly flustered; and now I think of it, Sir Henry wanted you to have a glass of wine or something before you left. But you said you were right enough, didn't you?"

"Right enough, oh, right enough in the way he meant. But I very nearly—Willie, I had a most awful shock," fixing upon him a pair of dilated eyes that had still some terror in them, "and if I managed not to show it, I am sure I don't know how I did. You know that woman, that Miss Adam they have got there as a sort of lady-companion for Lady Laura? She came the other day, and in their ridiculous way they had her dining to-night——"

"I sat next her at dinner. Nice, pleasant person I thought."

"What did you talk about? Pau? Nice? Paris?"

"Paris, I daresay. Yes, I believe we talked about Paris among other places. She seemed to have been in a lot of places."

"And about Nice? Did she speak of Nice?"

"Very likely. Yes, I think she did."

"Was anything said—try to remember now, and don't be tiresome, Willie, dear, for you will understand directly—did you, or she, or did either of you say anything—but of course you wouldn't, it would be she who——"

"My dear child, I'll say or remember anything you like, if you will only not fly off at a tangent each time you begin. What is this about Miss Adam? Great Scott!"—suddenly, "you don't mean that, eh?"—his broad,

good-humoured face all at once as serious and perturbed as her own. "You—you don't mean that, do you?"

Daisy nodded. She was now busy taking off her diamonds and laying them with shaking fingers on the dressing-table. He whistled softly under his breath, then with a quick look at her, "Where?" said he, sharply.

"She said at Nice. But very likely elsewhere as well."

"You poor little article! Well, all I can say is, it was a blackguard shame to come out with it, whatever she knew; and—and—botheration!—it will be all over the place to-morrow. Who heard? Who got hold of it?"

"That was why I wanted to hear what you had to say, before telling you. We may yet stop her; for I fancy, I feel pretty sure she has not yet told the Maynards; and oh, Willie, don't you think we might prevent that?" clasping her hands. "Those sort of people can be bribed——"

"Stop a bit," said he, kindly.. "Just you calm down, and we'll see what can be done. First of all, let me hear exactly how it came about? And I say, never mind how you put it; you know it's only to me, and I may as well have the truth," with unconscious irony, "if I am to act upon it."

"Of course I'll tell you the truth, Willie," tearfully.

"Out with it then," Willie laughed, and patted her shoulder. "Remember I'm in the same boat with you, little woman, and we sink or swim together. If the air of Somersetshire doesn't suit us after this, we'll pitch our tent elsewhere. It was bad luck this happening tonight."

"And Major Everest with us too."

"Aye, and Everest with us too. But we'll weather it somehow. Now then, how was it? How did it begin?"

"It never began, it was all done and over in a minute. She must have crept up behind me when I was not looking—at least I should never have noticed or thought

about her, if I had been looking—and I heard her horrid voice in my ear; I thought she was asking for some song or other, and oh, I can't tell you how dreadful it sounded, yet so innocently put—'Have you got any of those sweet little *chansons* you used to sing as a girl? You were Peggy Vickers, weren't you? And I remember you so well singing in front of the Hôtel des Anglais at Nice, accompanied by your father on the violin.'"

"You think she meant it?"

"Meant it!" Daisy laughed bitterly. "And the provoking part of it is that if I could only have kept my wits about me, I might have done so much better than I did. The last thing I ought to have done was to show I was caught. Often and often I have said to myself, 'If this should happen, I know how to meet it'. The only way would be to throw myself on the person's mercy—say how long ago it was—and how I had been married for years and years—and how dreadfully it would go against me if people knew I had been a street singer;—and yet that I had always been an honest girl—and that you knew all about me when you married me—and it would pain and shame you as much as me—"

"Yes, yes, that would have done right enough, but the mischief is that you didn't get a chance of saying it. At least, I presume you did not."

"Worse mischief, I not only said nothing, but I looked daggers."

"Ha!" He nodded thoughtfully. "That was foolish, little woman. That makes things awkward. Heard you singing in front of the Hôtel des Anglais, did she? And that meant in front of a dozen other hotels. Hum—ha! Remembered your voice, I suppose?"

"She couldn't. There is nothing in it to remember. I was a poor untaught girl then, and until my voice was trained——"

"It was the sweetest little pipe I ever listened to. And it was the prettiest, raggedest, little girl, with her shoes all down at the heel....."

"Oh, Willie!"

"—that caught my heart, let me see, is it thirteen years ago? That Miss What-d'ye-call-her must have a fizzer of a memory. Why, you were but a slip of a thing, like a young colt, all eyes and legs; no more like what you are now—not half so pretty; no, not half; and yet," musing, "I sometimes think of you, Daisy, as you were then, with your little hands crossed upon your breast, and your eyes looking out from under the lashes—looking pretty sharp after the pennies too—Great Scott! how they glittered when I dropped in a golden louis one day!—that was the end of *Peggy*, the singer, and the beginning of *Daisy*, the brewer's wife. Faith, you didn't do badly in the world's lottery, Mrs. William Curle."

She came near and laid her head upon his shoulder.

"I ain't a bad sort of husband to you neither," proceeded he, stroking it fondly. "I'm no more a gentleman than you are a lady. And I had no one but myself to please, as my old mother said,—for I had the keeping of her, not she of me, and the purse strings give a man the right to choose his wife—or so she had the sense to think. She was always kind to you, Daisy."

"Oh, very," said Daisy, indifferently.

"And though it was a disappointment to her that there were no grandchildren——"

"Hush, never mind that." A sharp catch of the breath that might have been a gasp or a sob. "Now, Willie," lifting her head, and brushing away something not unlike a tear, "the thing is, what are we to do, we two together, to stop this old, old story of ours getting about? As you and I look at it, dear," her lip trembling a little, "it isn't so ugly. In the middle ages it would

have been quite romantic—see how I profited by my Paris schooling, Willie; no one ever dreams I had only three years' education—though I take care to say that I married early and had been allowed to run about wild by foolishly indulgent parents beforehand—(when I think of my poor old dad, and how he rapped my fingers with the bow if I sang flat!)—but I don't suppose even Beatrice Maynard detects any real, any out-of-the-common ignorance. You see I have read and read, and regularly tugged at books and people and everything, to learn from them all there was to be learned. Where was I, Willie? Oh, how late it is!"—as the clock chimed the hour outside—"we can't talk more, we must plot and plan to-morrow,"—and he was pushed towards his dressing room door, and the conference was at an end.

Down at the bottom of her flighty ambitious little heart, Daisy Curle loved her husband; but a temperament such as hers, for ever in search of emotions and sensations, finds no scope for these in the stolid attachment of a simple and commonplace individual; and though, to do her justice, any tokens of her Willie's tenderness were received by his wife with complacency, and she put absolute faith in his devotion, her restless vanity required to be fed and pampered by extraneous conquests.

And we all know, though Mrs. William Curle did not, and imagined herself peerless among women because of her achievements in this line, how wonderfully easy such conquests are. The young married lady whose husband gives her a free hand is the precise mark for non-matrimonial attentions, bachelors' or otherwise,—especially if she understands the position and does not expect too much.

We are not speaking of so-called liaisons.

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Daisy Curle was a perfectly respectable person; the very person for idle unmeaning gallantry to toy with;

and, as a natural sequence, wherever she went she found it as easy to annex an admirer for the time being, as to pick up a pebble on the beach.

That she was clever goes without saying; she was also sprightly and amusing, and had a certain piquant charm of manner, due to an infusion of foreign blood in her veins. No one could hit off a characteristic, mimic a foible, or tell a story with more mirth-provoking drollery; no one could laugh more merrily at her own or at others' wit,—so that her being a favourite with the other sex was due even more to lively powers of entertaining and being entertained, than to the attractions of her face and figure.

These last were indeed set off to every advantage by means of her husband's purse and her own taste. She had more than a talent, she had a genius for dress. Her ornaments were never in excess; her hats never too large, nor her trains too long. At Homburg or Monte Carlo she exhibited, indeed, the gayest, the most elegant and fanciful of costumes—(Willie would lift his eyebrows at the bills, but a kiss set that straight)—while down in the depths of Somersetshire the plainest and neatest of tweed suits were de rigueur, and we are bound to add were every whit as becoming and appropriate.

As with her dress, so with her mental attributes. They were adaptable, while yet in a curious sense sincere. Daisy had now been married for over ten years. William Curle had acted by her as honourably and generously as a man could; he had paid her solemn visits, at stated intervals, throughout the period when she was at his expense being educated at a convent school in Paris—and presented himself as a wooer, not as a predestined husband, at its close. If she chose not to marry him, she need not do so. She was in no wise bound.

Miss Daisy Vickers-no longer Peggy-looked abso-

lutely blank at this. Not marry him? She had been looking forward to marrying him all along. Did he mean that now—now when she had told all the girls, and received their felicitations, and the Lady Superior herself had blessed her—that now he was not going to —to—(a burst of sobs)—to marry her?

He caught her to his breast, and felt himself the happiest man alive.

And strange to say, the moment was never repented of by either. At first Daisy was somewhat shy of society and fearful of her own powers—but by degrees her ready wit and perception made even its most tortuous paths plain.

She was taken for granted—thus were nine-tenths of the point gained. Then she had always her story ready of the convent school and the early marriage; and no one ever thought of inquiring what had preceded the school-days?

Nor were the people among whom the Curles went as a rule fastidious.

"I say, you do as well as any of 'em," quoth William proudly.

At the end of ten years Daisy wanted a change of scene, and had a mind to mix with greater folks. The chaplain at a Swiss resort where she was wintering spoke strongly on the subject of home duties, and condemned the unremitting pursuit of selfish pleasure; he was an earnest young man with a pale, sad face, and he had not a more ardent attendant in the little mountain chapel than Mrs. William Curle.

It would be unfair to say that her heart was not touched; but it was a heart capable of being touched and touched again without receiving any abiding impression; and it said something for the young curate's ministrations that they did produce a certain practical effect. Mr. Curle bought The Hollies, and his wife set

herself to fulfil the obligations of her new position— (not altogether to the satisfaction of the older inhabitants of the parish, as we know)—still, matters were improving, and all might have gone well had not Houston Everest been met with in the meantime.

He had bowled out the curate, appearing on the scene at the very zenith of Daisy's religious fervour,—and now here he was installed within the walls of the English home, whose existence was due to the persuasions of his predecessor.

Fickle Daisy found the school, and the parish, and it is to be feared the daily service too, somewhat of a bore after Everest arrived. She wanted to be out with her guest, riding, driving, parading him to meets and luncheon parties. Willie's assurance that Everest had come for sport, and would be content with her society in the evenings, was jeered at as Willie's stupidity. "I shall certainly take him to see the pretty girls about," cried she.

And she did actually drive him to one or two houses where the fresh-coloured, countrified damsels were pleasant enough to look upon, but wofully difficult for a man like Everest to get on with.

He laughed when he found himself again with Daisy in the carriage. He liked the drive home, and did not find it long, though the coachman had orders to take a round in order to obtain a view from a distant common—which view, by the way, was pretty nearly lost in the dusk by the time the party reached the spot. Everest and his companion, ensconced within the comfortable brougham, did not, we may be sure, find the way as long as John and Thomas did on their cold box-seat, shivering in the mist and gathering darkness. Daisy was a delightful companion for a tête-à-tête.

But why when she was so ready to go to the Wildes

and the Oldcastles and the anybodys who lived miles and miles away—bad roads were nothing to her—did Everest's pretty hostess omit to present her guest to her nearest neighbours, to whose house it was surely natural he should have been taken first of all?

"They are such a set," cried Daisy. "Not Beatrice"—seeing Willie about to interpose—"you know I always except Beatrice, who is my particular friend,—and, by the way, she was here to-day again, Willie, and it would have been such a good opportunity to introduce Major Everest, only you had taken him off with you—but all the other Maynards, from Lady Laura downwards, are hopeless. They have stuck down here in the mud till it cleaves to their very souls, not to say their garments. Beatrice's skirt was an inch deep in it to-day."

"Can't escape the Somersetshire mud," said he, cheerfully.

"Oh, you can; I do. One only needs to wear shorter petticoats—excuse details, please—and to have them differently cut. Those girls know nothing about dress. Don't you think a woman ought to know how to dress, Major Everest?"

Major Everest certainly did think so. In fact, he thought all women did know.

He had to be enlightened—with illustrations. Daisy looked very pretty and delightfully serious and emphatic over the important subject.

She skipped off the Maynard ground; she was too quick-witted to make it a matter of discussion, and arouse interest. It was not till Everest had actually to be taken to the dinner-party that he knew anything about the family who were giving the entertainment.

Then indeed he was laughingly assured of losing his heart to one or other of the young ladies; its surrender to Beatrice was prognosticated; and a lively sketch of all that this would entail poured into his ears. "Of course you will fall a victim, sir; you have held out hitherto, and plume yourself upon it, though I have done my best to show you what nice girls we have even in this benighted region,—but did you suppose they were all that we could show? You are mistaken indeed. Wait till you see Beatrice Maynard."

Another time it was, "Beatrice will lay herself out to be pleasant; one can depend on her for that, with a wounded hero in the question. What? Mustn't I say 'A wounded hero'?—oh, I know you detest to be called that, but it is the guise under which you will appear to the Maynards; for they have already been talking about you——"

- "Oh, no!" cried he, with disgust.
- "Oh, yes," retorted she, merrily.

"And they are simply dying to meet the hero—but I would not flatter your vanity by telling you so before. Between ourselves, I believe that you, and no one but you, are the occasion of the dinner-party."

To this Willie demurred in vain. He heard the Maynards always gave a couple of autumn dinners, and Daisy knew they had been at one already—"So we had, and that would have knocked us off, as it did the Halls and the Tomlinsons, and all the rest who were there," interposed she, triumphantly, "yet you see here we are asked again! We, and only we—and Major Everest."

The two men looked at each other. Finally the husband spoke. "She's a deal too clever for us," said he, with a proud laugh. "Now I should never have spotted that. But I daresay she's right, Everest. You will have to play the great man,"—shaking his head profoundly.

Altogether, Everest was made to rebel against the party with all the instincts of a soldier and a gentleman—and then was bidden to go and get ready for it. We

know the rest, and can resume the thread of our narrative.

It will be remembered that Willie Curle, when appealed to by his wife as to whether her discomfiture at the hands of Miss Adam had excited observation or not, was positive in his assurance that it had not. But Mr. Curle was one of those persons who find it impossible to imagine that any one sees what they do not see themselves. He noticed nothing—ergo, there was nothing to notice.

Had Daisy put the same question to Everest, she would have received a different reply, and she would have seriously embarrassed the gentleman. It chanced that his eyes were full on his aunt at the moment of her approaching Mrs. Curle, and his attention, which had been diverted during the last hour or two, was suddenly aroused and concentrated on her by what followed.

The odd little figure, so unremarkable to every eye but his own, had all the semblance of drifting by accident into the blaze of light wherein Daisy sat, still occupying the central position on the music-stool. Everest, lazily wondering why, with her very good reason for coveting obscurity, his relative should have emerged from it at such a moment, saw her stoop to address Mrs. Curle, and saw—yes, he saw and could be under no mistake—the instantaneous and amazing effect produced by the whispered communication.

Like others, he at first concluded that its purport must have been an intimation, clumsily conveyed, to the effect that no more music was required by Lady Laura, and could understand the discomfiture and resentment of a guest thus publicly humiliated,—but the look of abject terror and defiance cast by Daisy on her tormentor puzzled him.

And subsequently Daisy ignored the subject. It

would have been natural for her to burst forth the moment she was alone with her two supporters, himself and Curle, who, as a matter of course, would be on her side, ready to reprobate with sympathetic indignation such a gross breach of the laws of hospitality and decorum—yet never a word said she.

"Sprang from her seat like a little tigress!" ruminated Everest, smoking by himself, since he was debarred his host's company. "Panted and glared like one too. What could Lady Laura have said? Or, stop a bit, was it Lady Laura after all? Lady Laura was at the other end of the room-(though of course that goes for nothing)—but somehow I fancy she would have looked less calm and smiling—she is not the kind of woman to dissemble-there would have been frowns and impatience—some coldness in her 'Good-bye,' at any rate,—and it was civil as possible, and Daisy as civil back. Women are born hypocrites; but I don't fancy, however much my little friend overhead might choose to put a fair face on it, the other could if she tried, supposing a deadly affront had been offered and taken. No"—he shook his head thoughtfully. "No. It wasn't that. Lady Laura wasn't 'on' in that piece, say I. The aunt played it off her own bat, and what she did it for, and what it was at all, I should very much like to know."

"She shall tell me, too," continued he, after a pause. "She shan't be allowed to go about stabbing in the dark for the fun of the thing. Poor little Daisy! I hate to see a woman look frightened. And she was so bright and jolly all the evening—though by the way," his thoughts taking another turn, "by the way, I don't think she above half liked my getting on so well with her friend Miss Maynard. She needn't mind. Surely a man can talk to a girl, and admire her too—and I shall tell Daisy I did admire her—without being branded as a

deserter on the spot. I thought we should have had that out in the carriage"—rising and knocking out the ashes of his pipe, "but we came home as flat as ninepins, and—and it wasn't Lady Laura's doing neither," he nodded in conclusion.

When Daisy woke the next morning, she knew that something had happened.

There was her Willie by her side; his broad, contented face reposing on the fine linen of the pillow, still sunk in peaceful slumber; there was the joyous sunshine of a bright winter morning pouring its beams through the frosted panes, lighting up her handsome, pleasant chamber, and making the toilet-table glitter like a silver-smith's window; there was the tempting tea-tray by her side, on which lay the letters brought by the early post; last, but not least, there was her fair self, refreshed by a night's sound sleep, well and strong, and eager to bound forth once more into the unknown—and yet before memory could play its part, and whilst thought was yet drowsy, loth to bestir itself, she was conscious of a waking sensation, shaping itself thus:—Something had happened.

What was it? In what direction lay it?

Who does not know the feeling? The sense of confused trouble wherein we grope to find a nucleus?

And then the throb of pain, or of shame, or of anger, when that nucleus like a raw nerve is touched?

Such moments can be counted in the retrospect.

When hers came to pretty Daisy Curle, she threw herself down among the bedclothes again, and clutched the sheet with her hands.

At the commencement of her wedded life she had lived as it were on the brink of a precipice, and neither fretted nor worried about it; partly because the dread was habitual and familiar, but still more because exposure would then have been a minor evil as compared with now. Ten years of established position and consequence had set such a gulf between the rich man's wife with the world as she knew the world at her feet, and the waif who caught at her lover's arm as though her very existence hung upon his breath, that she shuddered to look across that gulf.

A sense of security, too, had grown with time. She had herself changed so greatly, and that not merely in appearance—though from being thin and brown, she was now plump and very fair—but in speech, movement, demeanour—that whereas the singing girl had been timid of aspect and reticent of mood, Mrs. William Curle was noted for her spirits, and had all the pretty boldness of an universal favourite.

We have seen how she gained over Lady Laura Maynard—but Lady Laura would not have been so easily won half a dozen years before; she would then have seen a good deal to make her feel dubious, if not positively antagonistic; and the little woman who was perfectly aware of this, and whose business it was to soften every offending angle, and shed bit by bit every lingering trace of her vagabond youth, was so extravagantly pleased by her conquest of the severe and critical matron, that her elation had to be explained to the only person capable of appreciating the explanation.

"You take it you can stand any test now?" quoth Willie; whereat she laughed and nodded, and the brewer's hat went off very low to Lady Laura the next time he met her.

Was it not a cruel and horrible piece of spite on the part of Dame Fortune to choose the Maynards' drawing-room for the scene of her coup?

And who was this woman, this horrible companion—Daisy had all an upstart's vulgar contempt for dependants—that she should dare to threaten, stop—

did she threaten? What were Miss Adam's precise words?

Do you remember them, reader? Daisy Curle had not an instant's hesitation in recalling every syllable.

To be absolutely correct, we ought, perhaps, to say every syllable of the all-important sentence. Something there was about "Sweet little chansons" as a preliminary; that did not count; it was the next phrase which burnt itself into her brain—"You were Peggy Vickers, weren't you? I remember you so well singing in front of the Hôtel des Anglais at Nice, accompanied by your father on the violin."

If only she could have opened her eyes in blank amazement, and burst into laughter. She ought to have protested she had never been paid such a compliment. And pray, who was "Peggy Vickers?" A professional, of course. And was it possible that her own poor little pipe was being likened to that of a professional singer? Miss Adam did her too much honour.

Had Miss Adam persisted—but she would not have persisted; Daisy would have speedily shown that a case of mistaken identity, however amusing and flattering, must be acknowledged with apologies—and the whole scene would have passed off harmlessly, and she would only have needed to be a very little more careful than usual when Miss Adam was by in future,—whereas now, now she could have torn her hair to think how madly she had flung away her chance.

To be sure Willie had given her some comfort; but now that she thought over his words in the cold morning light, they did not seem to go for much. What did it signify that her ignominy had not been public all at once, since it must certainly follow, if it had not, so far as the Maynards were concerned, followed already? Miss Adam had only to tell her secret and all present

had the witness of their own eyes to its truth. Sir Henry would say, "So that was it?" recalling his solicitude and his offer of wine. Lady Laura had kindly remarked on the blanched cheeks which had paled to wanness as the blood died out of them; and even giddy-pated Kitty would add her quota, since Kitty, the only one of the family who had actually been by when the blow fell, had whispered consolingly, "Don't mind; it is only that mother is getting tired and wants them all to go"—taking for granted that sympathy would not be out of place,

"Willie, do wake up. I have been thinking about Miss Adam."

"Hey—what? Oh, confound that Miss Adam—yes, to be sure; she has got to be squared, I suppose. Look here now," with the drowsy yawn of a man who has slept long and to good purpose, "there is no use in your weeping and wailing and making a fuss. It's a bit of a nuisance, I confess; but after all, it isn't a matter of life and death. Suppose this woman does tell——"

"She will; of course she will."

"Let her. That's all."

"All?" echoed Daisy, in a high voice. "Willie, you don't, you can't mean what you are saying? Let her tell the Maynards and—and everybody, what I was, and ruin me?"

"Pho-pho—ruin you? Nothing of the kind. Who's to ruin you? Ha'n't you me at your back? What can they do to you? They can't strip you of your house and your carriage and——"

"What are houses and carriages? They can take away my good name——"

"Nay, my girl, no living tongue can take that; you are as honest a woman as Lady Laura herself."

"Of course;" she threw up her head proudly. Then

with a sudden inflection of bitterness: "Yet if I were not, and were born one of themselves, there are many— I don't say the Maynards, but there are many, oh, hundreds, who would be more ready to look over that, than my intrusion into their ranks from—from what I was, and what my people still are".

"More shame to them! What business is it of theirs-

"Willie, it's no use blustering. It is so, and we can't help it. Now, think. Think what we can do, and then we must do it."

"Practical little woman. You have more sense in your little finger-"

"My sense won't help me much unless we can devise some means of stopping Miss Adam's mouth. Could you-" she paused.

"Square her?" said he, promptly.

"Yes, square her. I suppose it can be done. Those things are done, aren't they? One reads about it in books, how people, who hold a secret hanging over some one, are paid to be quiet-"

"Hush-money. Hum!" He paused and ruminated. "It would be confoundedly awkward though, unless she made the first move. Of course what she said last night might be taken to mean the first move—but again it might not, and to meet it half-way would be the very fat in the fire. Supposing this Miss Adam only meant a bit of harmless---"

" Harmless !"

"You have not in any way offended her, Daisy?"

"I never set eyes upon her till last night."

"Then she can't have any spite against you, nor any reason for wishing to blacken you to the Maynards. So far, so good; we're getting on. In that case it would be the very worst possible policy for us to take the initiative

by showing her what a trump card she holds in her hands, before we know how she is going to play it. If she is a blackmailer, it would be an absolute invitation to her to raise her terms; if not—phew!" He whistled softly and shook his head.

"But are we to do nothing?"

"That's what I advise. Take not the slightest notice of what has happened, until——"

"Until it is too late. Willie, I did think you would have helped me; I did think you would have stood by me; and it all ends in this." Tears filled her eyes. "And I was so happy here," proceeded she, plaintively, "I seemed to be getting on so well; everybody friendly and not a house we don't visit. Of course if the Maynards cast us off——"

"Stop. I've a thought," said he. "Let it hang on this. If Miss Adam tells the Maynards, you will find it out fast enough, I suppose; you see Beatrice most days, don't you? Well, directly you learn that they know, I'll go myself to Sir Henry—I pledge myself to do this for your sake, Daisy—put him in possession of the whole story, and ask him as a man and a gentleman to stop its going any farther. I'd see Lady Laura if you think that would be better; but I should myself prefer Sir Henry. Trust me that would be a vast deal more sensible and straightforward than having any underhand trokings with Miss Adam."

"I should have to be let down to the Maynards themselves," said she, ruefully. "They would never think the same of me again."

"Why shouldn't they? You never set up to be grand, eh? Oh, I suppose you did?"—catching the expression of her face; "you talked big to Miss Beatrice and the girls, like the silly little fool you are,"—good-humouredly.

A pity you did; but you will be let off cheap if you

have only to eat a corner of humble pie with them, and," scrambling out of bed, "it mayn't even come to that, if you keep your wits about you. Be civil to Miss Adam. You might even," he paused before his dressing-room door, "it would be no bad plan—if you could do it, and I think you could, you have pluck enough—to take a quiet opportunity of re-opening the subject with her. Don't show fright. Just speak naturally, and ask her how she came to recognise you, and whether she had ever seen you in the meantime or not? Eh? What d'ye think? I leave it to you, if you think you can."

"I don't; but I'll see. Oh, dear; I wish to-day were over!" sighed Daisy, as she rose at last.

But insensibly she cheered up while dressing. The day was so fine, her material surroundings so pleasant, her health so perfect, that after all there was still enough in her brimming cup of life to compensate for the loss of some of its ingredients. The Maynards were not the world. What were they?

Only a dull, over-rated family, whose importance dominated a remote country neighbourhood. To lose caste in their eyes might be disagreeable, but could be borne; and she might even in time regain some of her ascendency by the force of her own ability and assiduity. At any rate they would never betray her, once taken into confidence.

For a few minutes she almost thought she would overstep Willie's prudence, and herself advance to the attack, leaving Miss Adam out of the question.

How about going straight to Lady Laura? Or Beatrice? But then she recollected that Everest was to drive with her that morning to the meet, and that she had a particularly smart and becoming coat just arrived from her tailor, in which she meant to show herself at the gay rendezvous. There would be a big meet; the frost had gone, and for

very joy at its departure and fear of its return, every man and woman who could would be out. Mrs. Curle and Major Everest were to lunch at a house not far from the trysting-place. Willie, who preferred himself to follow the hounds on this occasion, had obtained the invitation for his wife and guest, and been praised and thanked,—it would be absurd to throw up the engagement. She decided to have her day, let it cost what it might, and afterwards—the deluge.

We all know what happened to the immortal Scrooge when he was prepared for any kind of Christmas ghost, and no ghost at all appeared. Mrs. William Curle, spying from her window the figure of Beatrice Maynard approaching the house on the following afternoon, felt her heart beat and her fingers twist themselves together—yet to prove to herself that she was cool and undaunted she must needs fly out into the hall to meet her friend, and with kisses and chatter bring Beatrice into the cosy boudoir, where the two could be alone and undisturbed. Next, the latter had to be assured that the field was her own—orders were given that other visitors were to be turned from the door—and as for Willie and Major Everest, "They don't come home while there is a square inch of daylight in the sky," concluded Daisy, laughing.

But inside her pretty lips she set her teeth. Now for it, now for the tug of war.

At the end of an hour she could scarcely believe her senses. What had the talk run upon? Everything and nothing. Beatrice was neither warmer nor colder, more lively nor more serious than at other times. She was absolutely the usual Beatrice.

And it appeared that she had not come without a purpose; and in unfolding the purpose there was precisely the same little undernote of vexed impatience there always was when any family actions were discussed, which secretly

delighted Daisy, and which she had never thought to hear again.

"We have all done what we could, but my mother is adamant upon a point like this. She says she is glad of the excuse; she says now she was hurried into giving her consent before she knew; but still she holds to it that we ought not to appear at a ball three weeks after an uncle's death. It will be nearly a month, but that is no matter, my mother calls it three weeks; and although my uncle died in Australia and none of us have seen him for years—indeed, we can barely remember him at all—we are still to be supposed to mourn."

"And to stay away from the ball?"

"Certainly. My mother is surprised that we can even wish to go. Poor Gwen is in dire disgrace for crying."

"I do feel for her and for you all," said Daisy, cautiously.

At another time she would have burst forth into protest and invective; but, shaking in her shoes on her own account, she could not feel them firm enough upon her feet to kick out at Lady Laura. She could not say, "My dear! How absurd! How out-of-date!"—with Miss Adam's "You were Peggy Vickers" ringing in her ears. What should Peggy Vickers know of manners and customs? Peggy, whose kinsfolk might be still curtsying to the gentry when accosted by them, still gaping when their highnesses passed by.

"Of course Lady Laura knows best," said she, demurely.
"I always think that about those things older people do know best. For myself, I dislike mourning so much that I never give in to it; and, fortunately, neither Willie nor I have any near relations. If we had, perhaps it would make a difference. So that I am no judge."

"But I am," asserted Beatrice, impetuously. "I can judge as well as mother—better, for I know the ways of our time, which she does not. She will not accommodate

herself to them; and now of course people will say this is a mere blind, and that she never meant to go all along."

"But he really has died, Beatrice?"

"Died? Oh, yes,"—indifferently.

"You unfeeling person. 'Died? Oh, yes'—(mimicking). As if you did not care a bit!"

"But I don't. I don't care, nor do any of us. And why should we pretend we care? Even our parents say he was no credit to the family, and was shipped off to the Antipodes on that account; so why should we not go to the ball, and hold our tongues about him? Why should we not please ourselves and please our neighbours, instead of moping at home and quarrelling with each other over it? I quite see that perhaps mother ought not to go, but Mrs. Wilde would have taken us——"

"Or you could have gone with me?" said Daisy. She rose as she spoke, and adjusted a flower in a stand close by. This was her first move. How would it be taken?

If Beatrice rejoined as she could once have depended upon, "Oh, yes; we could have gone with you," all would be right; but if there were a pause, however slight, a hesitation, however trivial, it would be ominous.

Her ears were on the stretch, and there was, there certainly was, a faint alteration in the other's note as she rejoined, not on the instant, but after a moment's thought, "If I were you, I should not suggest that, Daisy".

In spite of herself a shudder ran through Daisy's veins. It was coming—she knew it was coming.

"We are old-fashioned people, and-"

"I am too young and giddy. But you went with Lady Elcombe to the Flower Show."

"Lady Elcombe is in our own——"

"I see. The Misses Maynard are very grand young ladies,"—affecting a tone of pique, in reality startled, and desperately anxious; "the Misses Maynard must have

a chaperon suited to their rank and state. My dear Beatrice"—the brewer's dapper little wife drew herself up, internally saying, "I can look as haughty as she"-" pray don't spare my feelings. Tell me straight out that I am not good enough," ("She will never say that," reflected Daisy.)

"You are not good enough," said Beatrice, steadily.

"You dear, truthful thing!" A shrill laugh covered or sought to cover the other's discomfiture. "That is what I adore in you, Beatrice; you won't be headed off when a fence comes in your way; you will take it or perish. And I am not one little bit angry. I think you are perfectly right. I am a mere nobody in this neighbourhood, where you are the great people; and I only forgot for a moment. Those sort of prejudices are so entirely gone by in most places; on the Continent, for example. Violet Fitzhubert asked me to chaperon a cousin to the Casino at Monte Carlo-" and she shot a glance. Violet Fitzhubert had done nothing of the sort, but what is imagination for but to be drawn upon at a pinch?

"The cases are different," said Beatrice, coldly. "I am sorry to have to offend you, Daisy, but I thought my saying it would prevent mother's saying it, which she certainly would. You understand it is nothing against you personally—;" and what was added after this, Daisy neither knew nor cared about.

In her immense relief she burst forth into the gayest of gay assurances and protestations. She rallied her friend upon her solemnity and credulity; declared she herself had been laughing in her sleeve all along; that she had never for one moment supposed that Lady Laura would confide her august daughters to the care of such a trumpery little person as herself-and on perceiving a cloud arise even at such self-depreciation, dropped her light tone, and very simply and properly observed that she hoped nothing which had passed would ever prevent her dear Beatrice from saying straight out if there were anything in her behaviour at variance with the opinions of a family for whom she had so much affection and respect.

It was well said—and we may add had been well thought over beforehand. ("If I ever need to recover myself with that starched-up girl, I can always fall back upon affection and respect," Daisy had frequently cogitated,—for she had all the instincts of a cringing and subservient class.)

Before her visitor left, she was on the top of the wave again, rattling and exuberant. Two days had passed and Miss Adam had told nothing; surely that meant either that Miss Adam for reasons of her own was not going to tell, or that she might be prevented telling? Beatrice, in talking of the dinner-party, made no reference to any contretemps, and bore a kind message from her mother to the effect that the singing had been a success. Lady Laura understood that Mr. Curle and Major Everest were going to shoot with Sir Henry on the following Saturday, and hoped they would come in to luncheon, and that Mrs. Curle would join the party?

A momentary spasm shot through Daisy's veins, caused by the mental vision of a quiet, little woman in black who would glide into the dining-room at the last moment, and perhaps sit opposite her and look at her—but she bravely accepted the invitation, and told her husband of it in Everest's presence with a steady voice.

Willie grinned as she spoke; eyeing her with a significance which called forth a sharp admonition in private thereafter. Everest tranquilly seated himself with the disengaged air of a guest passive in the hands of his entertainers, and was rallied for his indifference. "The Maynards, I tell you, Major Everest. You don't understand. You don't rise to the occasion. To be invited twice in one week to Maynard Towers is an honour seldom accorded to any of us meaner creatures. The great Beatrice herself deigned to convey the royal command."

"Everest would a deal sooner eat his sandwiches under a hedge in the open," quoth Willie, laughing. "You soldier fellows have no idea of food but as 'rations,'" continued he, addressing his fellow-sportsman; "a good table is thrown away upon you, Everest."

"The same can't be said of you at all events." Daisy turned the laugh upon her husband. "He always will settle what is to be put in the hamper when he is not in at lunch," cried she; "I'll expose you, Mr. Curle. You are far too greedy for a country gentleman. I heard you snuff up the smell of the soup as you passed through the hall yesterday evening, and inquire of John what soup it was? I heard you. And John didn't know, and went to find out. And you waited till he came back—yes, you did—and gurgled with anticipation when you heard it was your favourite hare—"

"My favourite hare! One would think I kept a pet animal!"

"Oh, don't try to turn me off. I appeal to Major Everest. Major Everest, don't you think a man ought not to know or care what sort of soup he is to have for dinner?"

"I can't say I ever thought about it, Mrs. Curle. Soup's a very good thing," said Everest, sententiously.

"There now, that is the attitude you ought to take, dear William. 'Soup!' 'Soup' in the abstract. He doesn't know one from another, and calls them all 'Soup'." She nodded to her husband vivaciously, then turned to his companion: "Willie has every kind, thick and thin, at his finger-ends. And he doesn't despise going in to the

Maynards' for luncheon, even though there is no soup—as there won't be, of course. The Maynards are nothing if not correct."

"And how do you know what is correct?" quoth Willie, jocosely. But he met with a black look.

He might have said the same thing a hundred times, for he was always by way of belittling his wife's knowledge of manners and customs, and assuring his auditors that she was only a child when he married her, and had remained one ever since,—but this badinage, which Daisy ordinarily took in good part, had another meaning now. She glanced anxiously at Everest.

Everest was thinking to himself that here was a chance for a private word with his aunt, and wondering when and how he could best obtain it? Consequently he looked absent, and was rallied upon his abstraction. What was he thinking of—or say, of whom? The fair Beatrice?

One thing Daisy Curle had never learned, and that was to let well alone; Beatrice, who had been completely out of Everest's thoughts, was recalled to them; and being a mere man, and having his weapon put into his hands, he could not, for the pure fun of the thing, resist making a little play with it at the expense of his fair tormentor.

She was thus impelled to talk about Beatrice and descant upon Beatrice,—and warming with her subject and her own eloquence, not only tell him a great deal that he did not know before, but that he might never have found out for himself.

It was a dangerous game for a jealous woman to play, and events might have turned out very differently from what they did, had not Fate, in a manner most unexpected, fought on the side of Folly, and shown, not by any means for the first time in the world's history, that a certain emotion with which the gentler sex is usually accredited, is infinitely stronger in the breast of a man.

CHAPTER V.

MISS ADAM DESCRIBES THE SITUATION.

"WHAT do you think of them, Miss Adam?"

Gwen and Kitty, clad in their new mourning habiliments which had arrived a few hours before, exhibited themselves in their mother's boudoir before descending to the drawing-room. It was the day of the luncheon party.

Much speculation and some anxiety had been felt as to whether the box from London would appear in time for the occasion; but now all was right, and Lady Laura having signified her approval, they turned to her companion with confidence.

"I was at death's door for a new frock," owned Kitty, who could be more free with her tongue than either of her sisters ventured to be in their mother's presence. "So this mourning did come in handy. I like myself in black,"—and she skipped in front of a mirror.

"Fie, fie, Kitty! Vain little Kitty!" But Lady Laura smiled indulgently. There were days when Kitty could say anything, and this was one of them.

Her ladyship thought the dresses very nice, very nice indeed; the only thing was, "Come here, Kitty"—but Kitty pranced out of reach.

"Now, mother, hands off. I know you are going to pull me about, and I won't be pulled. I feel so nice and rustly."—and she shook herself out with fresh satisfaction.

"Silly child, I was not going to pull you about, only to suggest—Miss Adam"—Lady Laura had already learned

to appeal to Miss Adam—"don't you think there might be a little frill, or ruffle, or something, to break the hard line round the throat? Oh, you don't? I daresay I am wrong, but—Kitty, do as I bid you, come here. How can I show Miss Adam what I mean if you persist in keeping away over there? Now," proceeded the speaker, having at length prevailed, "now, Miss Adam, is there not something wanted?"—with a dawning of disparagement that made Kitty also look anxiously towards the latter.

But Miss Adam, with deliberate mendacity, saw nothing amiss. Miss Adam, whose own Sunday silk (the product of a cheap and obscure female, whose wings such as they were had even been clipped) was such as to make her writhe when donning it for the occasion, could not but admire the young ladies' elegant costumes, could not find anything in them that—that could be remedied. Miss Adam gulped in her throat as she spoke.

"I daresay you are right," said Lady Laura, pleased for once to be found in the wrong, "it would be a pity to meddle with them. They come from Jay's, you know. One never quite approves of anything new, but when they have been worn a few times——"

"I am content with mine anyhow," interposed Kitty. "And though Gwen declares hers is too loose, she always says that of whatever she gets. We shall be up to Daisy's mark for once,"—and again she turned and twisted before the glass with ineffable complacency.

Miss Adam coughed.

"We have always Daisy to dress against now," pursued Kitty, for her benefit. "Before the Curles came, we just went about anyhow—and so did all the girls. We never thought of coming out in full fig except for the evening, and mother would like not to give in now,"—with a sly glance at her.

"What mother likes is of very little consequence" might

and would at another time have been the probable rejoinder to this audacity, but it was a day for mildness.

"I certainly think too much is made of dress at the present time," said Lady Laura; "in my young days it had nothing like the importance it has now."

("It has precious little importance in this house;" sotto voce from Kitty.)

"And as for your 'dressing against' Mrs. Curle, as you call it," proceeded her ladyship, "you must be laughing, my dear Kitty. Mrs. Curle! What is Mrs. Curle to us? Such a person naturally depends more upon her appearance than if she had any assured status. She is just the person who ought to dress—at least such is my humble opinion," wound up Lady Laura, looking not in the least humble.

"Quite so," said Miss Adam, seeing she was expected to say something.

"Oh, quite so," echoed Kitty, mischievously. "Daisy would be delighted with your decision, by whatever arguments you arrived at it, dear mother. She does turn herself out 'a treat,' as old Giles would say-and I know what she thinks of us!"

"It is not for her to think about you at all; she cannot possibly understand; she belongs to another class of society-but I daresay she means no harm," appended Lady Laura, finding herself uncontradicted. Had Beatrice been present more would have been said.

"Miss Adam has not said how she likes mother's dress." suddenly announced Kitty, not without an object. The Daisy-field, she was wont to say, was always more or less beset with pitfalls, and it was not safe to linger too long in it.

Miss Adam was now smiling at Lady Laura, and Lady Laura at her. The two were on the best of terms. Indeed, the good understanding which had been established between them, and which as yet showed no threatening of dissolution, was both a surprise and continual comfort to the rest of the household. "Miss Adam really does seem a hit," Sir Henry would delightedly aver.

And Miss Adam, having been able to express with warmth (and be it added with sincerity) her approval on the present occasion, was perhaps the cause of Lady Laura's extra urbanity. "We have already discussed my appearance," observed the latter, graciously—so graciously that it was obvious what turn the discussion had taken. Lady Laura could not have borne a dissenting word.

And happily none, not even a secret reservation, had been needed; since for once the luckless lady-companion was able to find her true opinion in harmony with her assumed one.

She had been hard put to it to praise the productions of the mighty Jay. To her eye they lacked style, fashion, distinction; they were common black frocks, that might have been and probably were turned out by the gross—and she had violated truth in every word uttered on their behalf,—but then, when did she not violate truth and the dictates of her conscience? She was doing that every day, and all day long.

And how was it possible not to do it? To assume a character which was at every point foreign to her real one, necessitated a lie at every turn, whether one opened the lips or not; the thing could not be carried on without, and "I am really not clever enough to argue the point" the little lady often said to herself, in defiance of a carping conscience, which would be heard and would not be silenced. "I shall go to some good man and get his opinion on the lawfulness or unlawfulness of disguise before I ever try it again," decided she. "Not that I ever shall try it again"—for she was sick of the job already, and would fain have thrown it up, but knew not how.

To have to praise ready-made frocks that dragged at the neck and dropped at the back! But "As well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb!" sighed Miss Adam.

With Lady Laura's handsome and rich attire the case was different. Her ladyship employed an excellent dressmaker who worked on sound principles, and naturally gave her best attention to a customer whose bill was never disputed and promptly paid. The Maynards did not know how to be mean.

"Good gracious!" Little Mrs. Curle, who bargained and haggled over every item and knew to a fraction the cost of every 'Extra,' would throw up her eyes in horror, while lifting this and that component part of the expensive and hopelessly ineffective costume to which her attention had been called by Gwen or Kitty Maynard—(Beatrice seldom talked of clothes)—"You don't tell me you gave that for this? My dears, you have been downright swindled,"—and she would eye with such withering denunciation the poor girls' very choicest bit of apparel that they loathed to wear it in her presence ever after.

Had they but known, they had now at their elbow a severer critic, and one whose taste was far superior to that of Daisy Curle.

And now enter Beatrice, and some one who has been waiting for this moment sighs in anticipation. If pretty Gwen and neat-waisted little Kitty could be so disfigured by funereal clouds, what will their effect be upon their sister, and how will her stately grace be lost? Beatrice has a commanding figure—so much the more space upon which to work disaster. "And that little minx," mutters Miss Adam, thinking of some one who is even now on her way to victory—but the next minute her heart gives a great bound, and she stands mute, transfixed.

Miss Maynard is not "Stock size," and in consequence her order has had to be carried out apart,—with the result that she alone of the sisters has had the benefit of an admirable forewoman's directions and discrimination.

"Oh, my dear!" ejaculates Miss Adam, breathlessly; and, forgetting her part, she devours the newcomer with her eyes. There is no bland, modest, suitably expressed commendation now.

Lady Laura, however, is not affronted; in fact, perceives nothing unusual. Lady Laura is busy examining through her eyeglass.

"Yes, Beatrice does look very well." Presently she turns to Miss Adam, in answer it appears to the above exclamation. "I do not wonder, however, that you should be surprised; I should not myself have expected mourning to suit her. Yes, that is a very nice dress;"—with precisely the same air of satisfied approval she had bestowed upon the other two.

"It is not the dress, it is she herself who looks grand." With an amazement that bordered upon incredulity, the impressionable Kitty gazed at her sister, and put into words what one other person present at least was thinking.

As a rule, Kitty did not admire Beatrice; Gwen, she considered, bore off the palm as regarded the family looks, while she herself was content to do with a small proportion and trust to her tongue. But to-day?

"She really does look glorious, who says not?" The shrill young voice rang through the room. "And so solemn, so sublime. 'She walks in beauty like the night,' hey, mother? you like me to quote poetry; is not that to the point? Like the night," pointing to the sombre folds. "'Tis the night that shows her in her true light. Can't you all see—Miss Adam, you see," impatient of no response—"how this robe of darkness suits our regal Beatrice? She will cut out Daisy for once anyhow;"—with a sudden descent from the heights of oratory.

And then there was a pause, no one exactly caring to speak.

Lady Laura would have chidden her favourite, but somehow there was something pleasing even to her non-maternal ear in the innocent ebullition: Gwen would have been plaintively aggrieved that her sister's dress so far surpassed her own, but could not in justice hold the former responsible for her proportions; while Miss Adam, secretly discerning and appreciating far beyond what it was in the power of the others to do, would fain have echoed every eulogium—and durst not.

Beatrice herself felt a glow of shy pleasure. In some ways she was singularly young of her age, and singularly opposed to the unblushing frankness of modern youth on certain subjects. She disliked to have her own appearance commented upon. She knew it was done but scant justice to; she was conscious that it was often undervalued; she even put on with disgust her ill-chosen attire, perceiving that at every point it misbecame her—but still she was too proud to speak. If no one else thought her face and form worth taking into consideration, worth being thought of and looked at, poor Beatrice tried to think she could do without that sort of thing.

As a matter of fact, she longed for it.

And on this day she had taken a great while to dress, with a feeling all the time that her pains would be thrown away in the end.

It was always so. She never surveyed herself in the glass while making une grande toilette without wishing she could have presented herself to those below at an earlier period of the business. In her white wrapper, with her thick brown hair flowing over her shoulders, she would look quite—quite respectable; but when Jane, a very elementary Jane, had seized upon the hair, and tugged and strained till it was pinned up as tight as

hair could go and strong hands could pin it—and when in lieu of the wrapper she was forced to don something which neither in colour nor in texture became her (chosen possibly with a view to Gwen, who looked her best in pink and pale blue), it was as if a cruel hand had wantonly obscured every charm. Beatrice required very careful dressing, and then—but she rarely had a chance of showing what might be then.

To-day she had done her own hair. She had marked the wavy softness of Daisy Curle's coiffure, and it occurred to her to shake down Jane's solid clump at the back of the head, and gather up anew the glossy waves—as pretty as Daisy's in their own way—so as to frame the face as Daisy framed hers. The attempt was timid, but the effect electrical.

With raised spirits she turned next to the black robe which lay upon the bed and presently, scarce daring to believe that the queenly creature whose image she beheld reflected in the mirror could be herself, stole with trembling steps along the passage to where she guessed a conclave was assembled.

"You never told me you were going to have your hair done that new way," murmured Gwen, the first clamour of inspection having subsided. "You said Jane would make a mess of it if she tried."

"So she would. I did it myself."

"And I think it is an improvement," hesitated Lady Laura, with whom even to think that anything new could be better than the old was a concession. "What do you say, Miss Adam? That is the new style," condescending to explain. "I daresay you noticed it on Monday."

Miss Adam had, and had thought one or two of the ladies' heads were very tastefully done. ("'Very tastefully done?' I am certainly getting up the vocabulary to admiration," chuckled she, to herself.)

"I have often fancied your hair was too tightly strained back," pursued Lady Laura, addressing her daughter, "but I never liked to say anything. I thought the other night that——" but the clock chimed the half-hour, and the party hastened downstairs to await the arrival of their guests.

While doing so, Beatrice experienced a feeling of elation to which she was little accustomed. The depressing sense of inferiority which had hitherto been invariably present to her when contrasting herself with Daisy Curle, even though that inferiority only related to such trivial matters as dress and fashion, galled her more than she was herself aware of—and now it was gone.

As recently as the beginning of the self-same week—to be more exact, on the Monday evening on which she had done her best to appear at her best, and failed—she had consciously suffered eclipse of a nature peculiarly humbling. She had seen her charming friend carry off the suffrages of old and young, not merely as regarded appearance, but by reason of her performance.

And that performance was almost as great a novelty to the Maynards as to their guests.

Daisy seldom sang in company; often when Beatrice was ushered into the drawing-room at The Hollies she would hear the sounds of music as the door opened, and beg in vain to have them continued. Oh, no, Daisy's singing was nothing, she was merely amusing herself; trying over a new comic opera, and getting up the songs that Willie would like; Willie liked to get accustomed to the melodies before he heard them sung by the real artists; Daisy would sidle away from the piano or close it resolutely as she spoke.

The desire to shine at the Maynards' dinner-party had however proved too strong for prudence; and as she knew herself to be in excellent voice—for she practised regularly

and carefully—she resolved to take her audience by storm, and did so.

Was Beatrice envious? Beatrice would have scorned to let her own deficiencies stand in the way of her appreciation; and indignant as she was with Daisy for quite another reason at the moment, her generous nature would still have prompted her to promote the brilliant display at whatever expense to herself, if only the singer had failed to secure the ear of one who stood apart, it is true, but who did not wear the air of indifference.

It was true that she had answered Major Everest curtly and turned from him quickly on his accosting her earlier in the evening; he had been unfortunate in following directly upon the passage at arms between herself and Daisy Curle,—but he need not have withdrawn so utterly and contentedly from further efforts. For herself, of course she had played into Daisy's hands; that instinct taught her, and for once she hearkened to instinct.

So that the evening was not a happy one to look back upon; and even her mother's unfinished sentence could add its quota of unpleasant suggestions, since Lady Laura was obviously drawing a comparison in her own mind between Beatrice past and present, not to the advantage of the former. But now, behold! the sore feeling is gone; the past is obliterated; she feels girlishly, foolishly pleased at nothing; she loves Kitty.

Lady Laura shivers a little in the large drawing-room, which a fire lately lit has not had time to warm; and Beatrice fetches a shawl for her mother before any one else has thought of doing so. She defends the servants, who ought to have lit the fire sooner: "This room is generally so full of sun, and we are never in it till after luncheon". Meantime with a newspaper she draws the flickering flame into a roar.

At the sound of the door-bell, whose clang in the dis-

tance she is the first to hear, she flies to hide the paper, and is standing by her mother's side, erect and graceful, with a bright colour in either cheek, and a smile of welcome on her lips, as the party is ushered in.

She is a noble-looking girl; but Everest's mind is not running on girls, noble-looking or otherwise, at the moment. His eyes dart round the room, and rest with satisfaction on a homely little figure stooping to pick up Lady Laura's dropped shawl, which has slipped from her ladyship's shoulders. Miss Adam does not restore the shawl, divining that it is no longer needed and mars the general effect; but she holds it in her hands, and smiles to herself as she does so. A shawl is very convenient when one has a little note to deliver unseen; especially with all this black about, against which ever so small a white fragment would show.

"Oh, thank you, Major Everest; perhaps you would kindly help me? These windows are so heavy, and Lady Laura is so sensitive to a draught, I merely want to be sure that this one is *quite* closed "—before she has reached the word "Quite" he is in possession of the note.

It is not for a long time afterwards, not till just before the guests take their leave, that she looks for her answer, and gets it, a silent, almost imperceptible nod, delivered at a lucky moment—and between these two little episodes no species of communication intervenes.

The luncheon goes off merrily, unlike most luncheons, especially at the Maynards'; but Beatrice exerts herself, as she is not in the habit of doing, and as for once Lady Laura is pleased to have her do. Lady Laura thinks she is a pattern mother, and would tell you that she is annoyed when her girls are stiff and shy and leave all the talking to other people. "They have plenty to say when it is not required of them," she alleges.

Honestly, Beatrice's knowledge of the affairs of the day,

and her being able to supply names and dates on several occasions when others are more than hazy on those points, is creditable with a man like Major Everest present. "You see you do not need to go out into the world to be well informed," she admonished her younger daughters presently. "Beatrice was quite as well or better able to hold her own in the conversation to-day than the Curles, who are such very go-about people."

"And wasn't Daisy dashed by us?" cried Kitty, with supreme exultation.

Daisy had not been as fastidious as usual about her appearance, taking it for granted that she would have no competitors, and aware that Lady Laura thought it vulgar to be smart in the middle of the day. She was neat and trim as ever; but a plain suit and felt hat did not set off her infantile style of beauty as did more elegant and fanciful costumes.

And again, Daisy when cowed was aggressive; her prattle became rattle; her chatter, clatter; she was a noisy, self-assertive, rather absurd little person when things were not going well with her. "This is not a bad prelude," reflected Miss Adam.

Then Everest also chose to be amused, and to add to the discomfiture of his friend; he would not seriously have vexed her for the world, but her jealousy of Beatrice Maynard was diverting and flattering; he rather looked forward to being presently brought to book for devoting himself to the latter, and shaped his conduct with a view to future raillery and pretty pouting—what man in his position would not?

Had he not been assured, positively assured, that he must fall in love with Miss Maynard? "Oh, you will, of course you will, you can't help yourself," shrieked Daisy; "there is no one else, you know. The Tomlinson girls are awful; and Clare Wilde has her own man; and the

Blunts and Vivians are out of range. Besides, Beatrice is just the girl to yearn over a wounded hero,"—(she knew how he disliked the epithet). "She is so good, so very good; and what if she is a trifle dull? You men never think of that; and then, I daresay you will wake her up. Now do take to her, and try to wake her up," he had been adjured with pathetic earnestness.

He had thought at the time that he saw himself trying to wake up a dull, good girl who would yearn over him as a "Wounded hero," but now he recalled Mrs. Curle's entreaties as he looked across the table at Beatrice.

The table was small, and conversation general. Sir Henry, who had come in from a county meeting full of information gleaned from his fellow squires anent political and military matters, was bent on airing it for Everest's benefit; Everest should see that they knew a thing or two in Somersetshire, and had some great men among them;—wherefore he could scarcely carve the mutton for racking his brains to remember what this one and that one had said.

To his surprise, he found his daughter Beatrice quietly informing him of the source whence the redoubtable authority on whom he chiefly pinned his faith had drawn his opinions. "He read that in the *Spectator*," said she.

Where had she seen the Spectator?

It appeared that she was in the habit of borrowing it weekly from the vicarage; and further interrogation disclosed the fact that she borrowed the *Times* also.

"You read the *Times!*" cried her father, looking round the table for astonishment.

Every eye was upon Beatrice, and Beatrice in return laughed.

She felt neither confused nor disconcerted; she experienced only a strange pleasure in being thus forced to speak out and in a manner justify herself.

Her father's tone meant "Heyday! Here's a pretty state of things."

And why should it be "Heyday"? And why should there be anything wonderful in her taking an interest in what were after all the most interesting things in the world? Her eyes sparkled with animation, her voice rang boldly and gaily out.

"'Pon my word, I feel most awfully ashamed of myself," said good-humoured Willie Curle, at last. "The papers come to our house, but I must own there are days I never look at 'em. And when I do, I like to skip about and find the amusing bits. Can't stand 'The war—the war—the war;' nor what they're doing in China, or Venezuela, or any of those beastly, murderous places. What we are doing here in England is enough for me."

"And for me," chimed in Sir Henry, who was John Bull to his finger-tips; "but, as I told Tallerman to-day, what with Sessions, and Boards, and County councils, one's time is so taken up that the wonder is one gets anything done. I haven't been out with my gun for three days," he concluded, with the air of a martyr.

Meantime, Beatrice and Major Everest were engaged in lively dialogue. He did not agree with her in a statement she made; she defended herself and attacked him.

"They are talking a great deal too much to each other," thought Daisy Curle.

And she thought the same thing again when, as the party was dispersed about the drawing-room, drinking coffee, she saw Everest and Beatrice disappear by a side door which she knew led to a disused apartment.

"What are those two about?" exclaimed she, loud enough for all to hear. "Willie will be rampant if Major Everest is not ready to start the instant he appears." Willie had lingered in the hall looking at stags' heads with his host.

"They are only gone into the old library," said Miss

Adam, who had hitherto effaced herself as much as possible, and only when she could not help it let her voice be heard at all—but who now met and faced Lady Laura's quick eve of interrogation. "At luncheon Miss Maynard referred to a passage in the ancients, and Major Everest challenged her to produce the passage. book is in the old collection, I believe."

"And pray how long will it take to hunt it out?" demanded Daisy, pertly.

"It will not take long for her, it might take longer for vou."

"For me?" Daisy started, and at once saw her danger. She had been fool enough to let this woman creep up to her again, and that when she was detached from the rest, helpless and defenceless. She had forgotten all about Miss Adam, and had now rashly provoked her, for she could not deny that her own tone was impertinent; she coloured and stammered.

To be sure. Willie's advice was to disarm her foe, or at any rate discover her plan of action: but there was in Miss Adam's eve and tone a something almost amounting to a menace, which boded ill for the success of overtures, and she shrank from attempting them.

Muttering something about its being only natural that Miss Maynard should know what books were in her father's library, she turned quickly aside, and paused over a bowl of flowers.

"For you," indeed. There was no mistaking the emphasis upon the words. They would not, they could not, have been addressed to an ordinary guest. They made her feel, and were palpably meant to make her feel, the prick of the sword which swung over her head. "Detestable! Abominable!" cried she, to herself.

But she did not go after Everest and Beatrice, as she had been minded to do when this venomous reptile crossed her path; she durst not attack the reptile, nor run the risk of its attacking her. It was safest to return to Lady Laura on the hearthrug, and show none of the impatience which momentarily increased as voices and laughter were heard beyond the open doorway—it being evident that an animated discussion was being carried on out of sight though not out of hearing.

Kitty went into the next room, and returned. "They are fighting it out," she observed for the general benefit. "He can't prove her wrong, and she can't prove herself right; so they are at it hammer and tongs."

"And that sort of thing has no end," cried Daisy, impatiently. "The only way is to pull the combatants apart,"—and she looked at Lady Laura.

But Lady Laura had turned to listen to Miss Adam. Miss Adam was asking her if she would have her shawl again? Miss Adam was always so attentive.

"Oh, thank you," said her ladyship, and felt impelled to accept the shawl rather than disappoint the good creature who was so careful of her. Daisy's hint was lost, and could not be thrown out again.

It seemed ages before the recusants reappeared; and when they did they were occupied with each other and their quarrel—Beatrice persistent, Everest obviously provocative and amused.

"There! I knew you would fall in love with that girl!"
The speaker may be imagined, and now she had her auditor to herself. It was the witching hour of dusk, and the sportsmen were back from the coverts; Daisy had dispensed tea, and her husband was off to the smoking-room. Now for bringing back her strayed lamb to the fold.

"Did I not prognosticate it?" continued the little lady, comfortably ensconced in a big armchair within the radiance of a fire which cast dancing shadows all over

her. Daisy was only mischievous and inquisitive; not in the least cross, oh dear, no—"I am just longing to hear how you fell a victim?" cried she, merrily. (A "Victim" was in its way as good as a "Wounded hero".)

"How does one fall?" retorted he. He was not clever at repartee.

"Apparently you know. But there are ways and ways; which way did you choose?"

"I am waiting for you to tell me."

"Come, sir, that won't do; that isn't fair; you may as well be candid, and own I was right; you have nothing to gain by putting off the evil hour. The fair Beatrice is——" and she looked archly expectant.

"A nice, sensible girl."

"Pooh! Men don't knock under to nice, sensible girls as you did to-day. Besides, you said that before; and there was a difference; oh, yes, there was a difference this afternoon from——" again she halted, waiting for him to give her a lead.

"She certainly looked uncommonly handsome to-day," said he, placidly. "And," after a moment, "uncommonly belligerent, too. She stuck to her guns like a good 'un."

"What a disrespectful manner of alluding to Miss Maynard, the great Miss Maynard, the redoubtable Beatrice who rules us all! Apparently you like being sat upon, Major Everest."

"Oh, I have no objection, when it is a woman who sits upon me," said he.

"And who carries you off to an empty room in order to perform the part more satisfactorily. We all looked at each other when you two vanished after luncheon."

"Why did you not come with us?"

"Had no card of invitation," she shook her head.
"You were swept off——"

"It was I who suggested going."

"And you knew where you were going to, of course? You know the house so well, and the old library that no one ever goes into. I should not wonder if you knew the very shelf on which the book was to be found—but, if you did, you need not have taken quite so long to find it. No, my dear friend, you know a great deal, but you don't yet know how to keep your heart, when it is laid siege to—"

"When it is, there will be time enough to show whether I can keep it or not. Give you word of honour there were no danger-signals going to-day. We had a little fun together, and I fancy Miss Maynard is more at her ease when out of range of her own people. Lady Laura is a formidable personage," said he, soberly; "but I am afraid I can't build any romance for you out of anything that passed this afternoon, either before or behind backs. I am an awful duffer at taking advantage of opportunities, and I never met with any one less likely to make the running on her own account than your friend."

Daisy had the wit to say no more.

At The Towers it was, "Really Major Everest seems a nice sort of man, better than I should have expected the Curles to have for a friend,"—from Lady Laura, in her most gracious accents.

"An uncommonly good shot,"-from Sir Henry.

"If only he were not going away so soon;"—a sigh from Kitty.

"What has his going away to do with his being a nice fellow and a good shot?" demanded her father, who had a knack of hearing remarks not intended for him. "What on earth does the silly girl mean?"—appealing to the rest.

"I mean what I say." It was Kitty who sturdily rejoined for herself. "Nice men and good shots are not so plentiful hereabouts—not so thick on the ground as you would say—that we can afford to be just shown one and

no more. He was staying at The Hollies for a fortnight before he was brought here; and now he has only been here twice, and goes away on Tuesday or Wednesday."

"It can't be Tuesday, for he is coming to shoot with me on Tuesday," said Sir Henry. "Oh, no need to have him in to luncheon; Curle isn't coming, and he is the luncheon man. We'll take a snack in our pockets."

"But of course if you would like to bring him in," said Lady Laura, with what for her was quite wonderful urbanity, "you know you can always do so without any need for making a party of it."

"You mean you wouldn't want her?" said he, bluntly. And it appeared that this was precisely what her lady-ship did mean. It was one thing, she alleged, to have two sportsmen, all in the rough, sit down informally to whatever was going, take their own plates to the side-board and fill their own glasses from the siphons; it was another to have a lady guest, especially such a lady guest as Mrs. Curle—somehow Mrs. Curle would have turned the whole thing into a party.

"All right," said Sir Henry. "I'll give Everest the chance, then; but I fancy he'll say he'll bring his own sandwiches. I invited him to go for a walk with me tomorrow; however, I couldn't get him up to that; I daresay he has had enough of marching. He had to be pretty careful even when we were only sneaking round the house, what with getting wet and hot and catching chills. Curle tells me Everest isn't strong yet, and is in a mortal fright of not being allowed out to the front again before the war is over."

"I should feel just like that if I were a man," cried Kitty.

If she could have idealised Everest she would; but it was beyond the power of enthusiasm itself to find anything worthy of a halo in the Curles' friend. Everest

was not in the least remarkable; had none of the attributes which are popularly supposed to make a man interesting; and, what is more, would have resented being accredited with them. He liked to go his plain way, unnoticed; and only when roused to action, and roused as it were out of himself, would he show of what stuff he was made.

And, good stuff as that was, there is plenty of it going, luckily for Old England, who can still turn out a worthy muster roll of honest, healthy-minded men more ready to do than to speak of their doings; shy of praise, and often unconsciously actuated by the high command to esteem others better than themselves.

But one dominant characteristic Everest possessed, which sometimes misled him and yet in itself was not undesirable—he could never think ill of a woman. Be she old or young, beautiful or the reverse, he regarded her worst faults as feminine weaknesses, and her virtues as bestowed by Heaven itself.

He had no sisters and no remembrance of a mother; his nearest and almost his only female relation was the aunt to whom our readers have been already introduced, and to her he owed a debt of gratitude for many bygone kindnesses, although until recently there had been but little personal intercourse between the two. In youth he knew but little about her, except that occasionally her existence was very convenient to him; and this of itself tended to establish his theory that there was something wonderful and incomprehensible about womanhood, since no man, he argued, could maintain an interest through life in an obscure and practically unknown individual simply because of the mere tie of blood.

He was not, on his part, conscious of any particular affection for his mother's half-sister; he would have been just as well disposed towards her had there been no such

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tie and had they met as common acquaintances—(he felt ashamed of this, but it was the truth),—wherefore her subtle and delicate tenderness of heart was beyond the comprehension of the sterner sex.

This was Everest's conviction, never put into words, but adhered to with the tenacity of a creed; and we have been obliged to insist upon it at this point of our story, since what follows would otherwise have been deemed if not impossible, at least in a high degree improbable.

Mr. Curle, who had no such blind reverence for the weaker vessel, had early discovered that he had nothing to fear from Everest's intimacy with his wife. He was himself a worthy fellow enough, and he was no fool. He knew the world, and its shady side; knew it, and to his credit, be it spoken, shunned its pitfalls, perceiving them by instinct.

When he was seen on the box-seat of Daisy's hired carriage at Lucerne, tranquilly enjoying the beauties of the landscape while Everest as an invalid reposed on the cushions within, Daisy's white dress by his side, he was in no wise discomposed by hints and railleries. When he welcomed the gaunt soldier as a guest in his English home, and adjured him to make that home his pied-à-terre for an indefinite period, he did so in good faith, and had a very real pleasure in being taken at his word. The two men had a good deal in common, and what they had not was supplied by the woman's tact,—and if Daisy cared a little more for Everest's attentions, and permitted him to engross a little more of her thoughts than either the husband or the friend divined, at least it was but a shallow vanity and a foolish sentimentality which had to be ministered to; and the edged tools which might have been dangerous in the case of another, were in hers innocuous.

Principle had nothing to do with this; it was the incapacity for strong passion and self-abandonment, joined to a preference for the lawful and respectable on Daisy's part, which enabled Everest for a longer time than could have been conceived possible to retain his ideal, while in daily and hourly contact with such a one.

She did not alarm him; she did not disgust him; she was only a dear little woman who liked to be petted and made a fuss about; and if it took two to keep the ball going, he was very willing to be one of the two. He and William Curle laughed together over Daisy's pretty jealousies and weaknesses. They endeared her to both.

"And now for this mysterious aunt of mine," said Everest to himself as he made his way for the second time to the identical spot in the woods which had served as a meeting place before; Miss Adam could think of no other, and during the week she had acquired a pair of thick boots, so as to face the pebbly path philosophically. "Now to hear what it was that made little Daisy jump out of her skin at the dinner-party. Confound it," added he, presently, "I might have discovered something yesterday, if I had been half sharp—but I forgot all about it."

"Well, my dear aunt," as she was seen approaching, "well? Here I am, your most obedient; and I can tell you it was tougher work to get away this time than last. Almost thought I should have had to throw you over. Mrs. Curle wanted me to go with her to the vicarage."

"Indeed?" said Miss Adam, dryly.

"And I should have gone but for you, so never say I am not a good boy. I rather offended my hostess; I had to say flat out I wouldn't go."

"A terrible effort on your part, no doubt. I wonder you can ever refuse anything to anybody."

"Can't. Not to a woman. In virtue thereof I am here to-day. You had the prior claim."

"For which you are reviling me in your heart. It is all very well to say 'Woman,' but don't tell me you have

no discrimination—though I daresay you are as big a fool as most men when it comes to that."

"Quite," said Everest, cheerfully. "It needs only to be a petticoat and I succumb. By the way, however do you contrive to talk as you do, (or rather as you don't at other times), when you are with the Maynards? What would Lady Laura say to hearing you call me 'As big a fool,' and with such a sardonic expression too? You ought at least to drop the wig and the mittens when you resume your native dialect."

"I have no mittens on to-day, only these great worsted gloves,"—and she held out a horrible pair. "Houston, you don't know what I am going through in that way, and in every way; every day and hour and minute there is something annoying that I had not calculated upon; and I cannot endure it much longer."

"Glad to hear it, I'm sure. Don't presume to criticise your doings, my dear aunt; you know your own business; but there is something so queer——" and he eyed her appearance with significant mirth, "I never can look at you without laughing."

"It has become no laughing matter to me. A hundred times a day I wish I had never put myself in such a position. Little did I realise what it was to cost me. I meant to come down for a week or two, thinking it would be rather amusing—I was a great hand at theatricals in my young days, though it would be as much as my place is worth to mention such a thing to Lady Laura—"

"Why, there's your opportunity, ma'am. Part company on incompatibility of sentiment."

"No, no. No, I am a foolish old woman, and could not bear to sink in Laura's estimation—what? What did I say?"—with a look of alarm.

"You called her 'Laura'."

"Did I? Did I say that? But what if I did? I am

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her own age, of her own rank, I always think of her as 'Laura,' why should I not call her so—to you?"

"No reason at all; only---"

"Well," impatiently, "well?"

"It seemed a slip," observed he, looking hard at her, "you caught yourself up, and went at me for looking at you."

"Nonsense. You were looking. However, let us return to what we were talking about before. I was telling you of all the misery this mad prank has entailed on me—for your sake." A break was drawn before the last words and they were shot at him like a bolt from the blue.

For very amazement he was silent, staring at her.

"Yes, for your sake," rapidly pursued she. "I told you last Sunday that I had business in Somersetshire which necessitated my personal supervision; that business was connected with you, and I had no means of accomplishing it, or at any rate I could not have accomplished it satisfactorily, except as an inmate of Sir Henry Maynard's house."

"You—you take my breath away."

"Keep it. You will need it presently, my dear boy; but I wish I knew how to begin," murmured Miss Adam, half aloud.

"Suppose I help you?" said he. "The other night when we were dining at the Maynards', an incident occurred. A lady was singing, or had been singing, and was being pressed to sing again, when some one, Lady Laura's new companion it was, stole up to her and whispered something in her ear, at which she started and nearly fainted."

"Oh no, she didn't. Nothing of the kind."

"At all events she was so much out of countenance——"

"Aye, that was it, that's better; out of countenance she was, if you like."

"——that every one imagined she must have received some dire affront. She has said not a word about it since, which rather leads me to suppose——"

"Hasn't she said a word? Neither to you nor to any one? Clever little hussy!"

A slight frown on Everest's brow responded to the tone of contemptuous admiration. ("Hussy!"—what a word!) "Whatever your whisper may have been, I am going to ask you to repeat it now," he said, gravely. "Of course you can refuse, if it relates to anything not proper for me to hear; but somehow I fancy that can hardly be the case? Am I right? Was it not in order to communicate to me the purport of what you said to Mrs. Curle that you asked me to come here to-day?"

Miss Adam nodded briskly. "You are right; it was."

"I don't see how it can have to do with me," pursued he, after a moment's reflection, "but I think you might as well satisfy my curiosity. That is to say," with a sudden afterthought, "if it is nothing detrimental to Mrs. Curle?"

"And how if it be detrimental?"

"Oh!" said he.

"You needn't twist your moustache and look stupid," cried his aunt, half vexed, half laughing. "Nor need you look so nonplussed, sir. Don't tell me that I am to hold my tongue, because what I can tell you of your fair friend will make you jump nearly as high as it made her. Good gracious, nephew, I am not saying she was a—you know what. But the fact remains that Willie Curle picked her out of the gutter, educated her, and married her. She was a pretty little creature of fifteen or thereabouts, with a wonderfully sweet voice and a wonderfully sour old parent. He played the violin for

her to sing wherever she could gather an audience, at such places as Pau, and Nice, and the rest of the English resorts. Where I heard her was at Nice. She was a remarkably pretty child, and one day I inquired of her her name, when to my astonishment she replied, in good English, 'Peggy Vickers'."

The speaker paused, and resumed. "When I went back to the same hotel the following year, Peggy Vickers had disappeared; and I quite missed my little canary bird, who had been as regular as clockwork in coming round twice a week before. The landlord and landlady at the Anglais were full of Peggy's good fortune. She had attracted the notice of a rich Englishman—one of their own customers. Did I not remember him? It was he who insisted on Peggy's coming round twice in the week instead of once; and the end of it was that he bought off the disreputable old father, and sent Peggy to school. When she had done with school it was said he was going to marry her. I thought no more of the matter, Houston," proceeded his aunt, "beyond hoping that Peggy's benefactor would marry her; and the Bélards, both Monsieur and Madame, were eager in their assurances that Mr. Curle was a most respectable, in fact an angelic young man—so things seemed hopeful. Still, I repeat, the whole passed from my memory till some three years later, when I ran across a young couple honeymooning in the Tyrol, and something about the much bedecked little bride seemed familiar. I looked for the names in the visitors' book, and read 'Mr. and Mrs. William Curle'."

Again the narrator paused, and again took up the thread of her narrative, as he made no remark. "The same evening I found the pair had the table next to mine at dinner. There was no mistaking that all was right and tight, matrimonially. Finding I was unrecog-

nised—for probably neither one nor other had ever bestowed a spare glance on an uninteresting, middle-aged spinster—I struck up the usual acquaintanceship, and 'My wife' was introduced with marked emphasis and pride. She herself, though much bedizened and bejewelled, was not so vulgarly demonstrative—I mean she was less self-assured and important than she has since become. I did not mind her—much. For a whole week we were together in the same place; and I could see even then that she was ready to make eyes at any man who was worth the trouble, though apparently devoted to her husband."

"She is so still," burst in he.

"That was nine years ago," continued Miss Adam.
"When I talk of honeymooning, my bride and bridegroom had been married for nearly a year, and she had already grown accustomed to her new position, and was but little harassed by fear of recognition. She did indeed look a different creature. An improvement? I don't know. Possibly. But at that time she did not powder and paint——"

" I say!"

"——as she does now," proceeded Miss Adam, obstinately. "Neither was she so determinately egoistical and aggressive. I cannot tell you what I felt when watching her both at the dinner-party the other night and yesterday afternoon. To see the Maynards, the proud, blue-blooded Maynards, taken in by a low creature——"

"Aunt Emmie, I-I wish you wouldn't."

She bit her tongue to prevent herself going on.

"This is the strangest story," said Everest, to whom it was naturally startling, considering the terms he was on with his hosts, and his absolute ignorance of anything peculiar in their history. "I must confess it is a bit of a shock,"—with an endeavour to laugh off his embarrass-

ment. "I should never have guessed there was anything. Do other people know? Do they suspect?"

"If they did, would there have been that crowd about Mrs. Curle on Monday night, Houston?"

"You mean that they would look shy on her, fall away from her?"

"I do. Emphatically I do."

"What a blackguard shame!"

Miss Adam started; this was not the effect she meant to produce.

"You say that she has done nothing, literally nothing, to make her unfit to enter any honest house, and yet that she would not be received at one?"

"I do not say that. I do not go so far as that. But she would certainly be received on a very different footing. If it were not so, and if Mr. and Mrs. Curle do not know it would be so, why are they so careful to conceal their story? Why did she look as if the skies had fallen when I reminded her, as you saw me do, of her antecedents? Yes, you saw. And all I said was 'Have you any of those little *chansons* you used to sing as Peggy Vickers?' If Peggy Vickers could have killed me for the suggestion, she would."

"It was a-diabolical suggestion."

"My dear Houston, there is no need for you to be savage about it. I can understand Peggy, or Daisy, or whatever she is called—I fully expected she would feel some slight emotion——"

"Aunt Emmie, why did you do it?" He caught her hand, and looked earnestly in her face. "You are not a cruel woman; you are not a narrow-minded, prejudiced, puritanical creature——"

"Obliged to you, nephew, go on." For he had caught his breath and stopped.

"You must have had some reason for it?" said he,

hesitating. "I can't believe you did it out of sheer——" and he looked to her to supply the word.

"Malice? Oh, dear, no. As you say, I am not that kind of person. And I am only waiting till you are ready to hear what my motive was."

"But I am ready; I have been ready all along."

"Not quite, Houston,"-dryly.

"You had to blow off the steam first," proceeded his aunt, steadily regarding his puzzled face, "and to clear your brain, before it could take a rational outlook at things in general. The Curles have been very kind to you; you have been living at free quarters with them for the past three weeks, besides being taken up, and looked after, petted and coddled when you first met at Lucerne. Mr. Curle is an easy husband——"

. "I say——" he flashed out; but on second thoughts, "there has been nothing of that sort," he relapsed, gloomily. "If people have been talking, it is confounded impertinence; and if you mean to hint——"

"I never hint," said Miss Adam, proudly. "I tell you plainly that your being continually with the Curles, going with them wherever they went when abroad, and finally following them to England, and being domesticated in their house as the sole guest for a considerable period, is a course of proceeding not likely to pass without comment. Houston, you are dearer to me than you think. I am almost alone in the world, and your welfare, your happiness——" she paused in some emotion.

He was obviously touched and his impatience checked by the tremor of her accents. His reply, when he made it, was more respectfully and cautiously worded than it would have been had it come a minute sooner.

"You have been very good to me, my dear aunt, and I am not ungrateful; but a man must stand on his own

feet, you know. I had no idea I was being watched,"—resentment again rising.

"Nor had I any idea of watching you," said she, calmly. "I wonder you do not say 'Spied upon'; that expression would have suited your feelings even better than the other at this moment. But, believe me, Houston, no one in this world can afford to suppose himself invisible. Doors and windows have eyes and ears. Yes, I see you glance at me, and I own not without cause; but my foolish escapade was not undertaken without my being ready to justify it if need were. To you I justify it now. I adopted this course to detach you from Daisy Curle."

"I may have had another object also in view," proceeded the speaker, perceiving a flush of indignation overspread his countenance, "but that was a secondary consideration—my first was what I have said. I knew you would not listen to me if I merely implored you to break off this intimacy of which I had heard——"

"From a parcel of meddlesome, interfering-"

"From perfectly dispassionate observers, who merely commented, without any object in doing so, on Mrs. Curle's having annexed you—'Annexed' was, I think, the term—and on your being inseparable. Nor are you the first who has been caught in that net, my dear Houston, by any manner of means. There was a black-visaged count before your day; and before him some one else. She may be respectable—indeed I ought not to say 'May,' for my informants emphatically gave it as their opinion that she was, and was merely philandering with one and another for the sake of amusement and display—but Houston, are you the man to be paraded by a vulgar adventuress——"

"I am very sorry, but I can't listen to you." She looked at him, he was white with anger.

"There has been enough of this," said he, between his

teeth; "I wish for your sake," with emphasis, "I could have stopped it sooner; but for me it makes no difference. What you thought to gain by abuse of my friends—my friend then," as she demurred, "I am at a loss to imagine. 'Adventuress' is not a term to apply to an irreproachable married woman, whose only crime consists in her having been born in a lower rank of life than that which she now occupies, and adorns"—with increasing emphasis. "And so far from seeing anything to blame in this, I—I admire her all the more for it. Stop," as she attempted to break in, "I don't wish to be harder upon you than I can help, but you have tried to bully me, and to frighten her; was this a course of action likely to—to——"

"It was the only course of action open to me."

"An underhand, cowardly—I could not have believed it of you; I will say it, I am ashamed that a relation of mine should have stooped so to forget herself."

"Would you have listened to me if I tried any other method, Houston?"

"I shall not listen to you now. I am infinitely sorry this has happened. It has shown me that a woman can stoop to use weapons which no man would soil his hands by touching. And I—I believe in women. I have always held them to be higher, purer, nobler than we are. You have opened my eyes—but not in the way you suppose. If I admired a pretty and charming and innocent creature before, what you have told me only renders her more interesting, and tenfold more attractive. The pathos of it! She stands on the edge of a precipice, and at any moment may fall into the gulf. She knows her danger, and——"

"All of this is very fine and heroic. Now for the prosaic part. Mrs. Curle—we will leave him out of the question, for he is not concerned except as an adjunct—she, this impertinent little upstart—hush!—I have let you have your say and now I shall have mine—she, knowing who

she is, what she is, and from what she has sprung, has caused herself to be admitted under absolutely false pretences into households where she knows, she knows she would never be received were her true story known. You will say that this is none of her doing, and that she is not responsible for the attitude of other people towards her? Perhaps not; and perhaps it could hardly be expected that she should have informed them of what no one seems to have thought worth inquiring about; but what I do complain of is her conduct, her demeanour, her assumption of authority and fashion. By her arts and assurance she has imposed herself, a gross caricature of a woman of the world, upon this simple neighbourhood, and completely subjugated the minds of—of some——"

"Of the Maynards, I suppose."

"To hear Beatrice, the proud-spirited, high-souled Beatrice quote Mrs. Curle!"

"She does quote her;"—triumph lit up his eye. "Not only does Miss Maynard quote her, but she seeks her out, confides in her, takes counsel with her; how do you account for that? Miss Maynard has some powers of discernment, some natural instincts, I suppose? Your depreciation of her judgment—"

"Pooh! She is blindfolded. There comes to the neighbourhood a rich man and his pretty wife, and they start with making friends with the vicar. The vicar and the vicar's family are enchanted with donations and subscriptions beyond what they have ever received before; also Mrs. Curle is assiduous in doing parish work. She is in fact quite the new broom sweeping in all four corners at once. They are such nice useful people; will the Maynards call? They can hardly help calling. Then Mr. Curle subscribes to the hunt, and asks men to shoot. You see I know all about it. The husband and wife feel their way; and there are no young people to raise

apprehension of awkward contingencies—indeed they are young enough themselves to be asked here and there in an easy way;—then Daisy begins. It is no use, Houston, I will go on. You thought you had caught me with Daisy's subjugation of Beatrice Maynard among others? I can show you the whole thing in a nutshell. time has come to wheedle herself into notice. She is so bright, so clever, so adroit in knowing the right thing to say and the right person to say it to, that she disarms every hostile criticism. The great ladies tell each other that she is not 'quite,' but she is passable, and so amusing. Lady Laura Maynard has taken her up; and, of course, if she goes to the Maynards—yes, you see what a point she scores by that? And now for Beatrice—Beatrice is not very happy at home. She is not in sympathy with any one there. She wants an outlet. But a stupid woman, or a woman brought up in the same manner as herself, and hedged about by the same restrictions and traditions, would be no good—because Beatrice frets for the actual throb of life, and to hear its great wheels whirring. And she thinks, poor girl, that in this counterfeit pretender to that knowledge for which she pines, she has found a kindred spirit! You wonder to hear me so warm, and to find me so conversant with all these details, seeing I have only been here three short weeks? I have known about the Maynards for years. Coming to live among them was like putting match to tinder." A pause.

"And now, Houston, that you have cooled down," proceeded the speaker in more easy accents, "and that you are listening to me with some outward show of deference—not that I resented your anger, my dear boy, it was superfluous, that was all—but now that you know all, have you forgiven me?"

"I have not forgiven you, and I never shall," said he. She had misinterpreted his attention and his silence.

CHAPTER VI.

"MAJOR EVEREST, I WILL STAND BY HER."

HE went away in a towering rage. It all seemed to him so mean, so despicable.

A woman to do it, too! It was as if he had beheld an angel fall, and felt that the angel had no business to do anything of the kind.

And Daisy, poor little thing, poor little fluttering bird; so gay in her unconsciousness,—rather so brave in her defiance of danger! Plucky little soul!—Courageous little creature! What torments must that soft little heart not be enduring and with so bold a front! There were no bounds to his admiration and tenderness on the one hand, nor to his wrath and reprobation on the other.

As he tramped along over the hard ground, he felt himself as hard as it towards the cruel perpetrator of an outrage which stirred his whole being into a perfect convulsion of pity; and how to circumvent her and render her powerless for further mischief set all his wits to work.

She held the winning card in the game, that was certain; his efforts must be directed towards preventing her playing it.

Something he could surely do; else why had he been invited to a species of partnership? He must puzzle out what that "Something" was,—and after a time he found himself thinking more clearly.

His aunt had come down to the Curles' vicinity with a definite purpose, that purpose being to blacken them,

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or at any rate to blacken Daisy in his eyes. Had it not been for him she would have let Daisy alone.

Here a fresh outburst of wrath intervened,—but when it cleared off, things were not as confused as before. It was plain that more was aimed at than a mere disturbance of his friendly intimacy with his hostess; and that his assurance of there being no stronger feeling between the two was disbelieved. This was abominable, he was not that sort of man; and she who talked of loving him and having his welfare at heart ought to have known as much. To suspect him of stealing into a friend's home and—and all the rest! He shook with fury, and kicked the stones out of his path.

Was there anything he could do to prove the falsity of such base suspicions? Of course he could leave The Hollies on the instant; there was no need even to wait till the end of the week, at which time his visit would have terminated of itself; he could find it necessary to be in Town a few days earlier, and depart the following morning.

And then he remembered that he could not well go in the morning, because no post came in before ten o'clock, by which time the morning train had gone. So be it; the afternoon would be soon enough; and though it was vexatious so far to play into his aunt's hands as to do the very thing she was bent upon his doing, it was better than leaving her in her present delusion, especially as there was no saying what course she might take if defied and irritated.

"Unless she thinks me a brute, she must think me an idiot," reflected he. "Either way I am expected to act like both brute and idiot; I am to be ready to fall in on the spot with an old maid's horror of anything unconventional, and sacrifice every feeling of gratitude and friendship rather than run the chance of having my name on the lips of fools."

There was no denying however that his aunt held the trump card; he repeated that fact to himself over and over again. She could at any moment pull poor little Daisy's house of cards about her ears,—for whatever he himself might feel, and in whatever light he might look upon the revelation just made, his heart sank as he realised the truth of the narrator's affirmation that Mrs. Curle would be everywhere received on a different footing were her tale known.

"That means she would be snubbed, slighted, and left out of things on every possible occasion," thought he. "And she, who loves it all as women do, and ought to do! Society is their kingdom; they have no other; at least," with a twinge of uneasy feeling, "of course some women are religious and all that, but Daisy hasn't a turn that way. It would simply kill her to be shown up—and no one knows that better than this malicious old aunt of mine, confound her."

"I'll go," decided he, finally. "I'll take myself off. But don't you think that it is because I'm afraid of you, ma'am," apostrophising 'Miss Adam' in his thoughts; "it's because I cannot let my selfishness provoke your malignity; I wouldn't budge an inch on my own account, and you might do your worst—but when there's another to be thought of, and that other the dearest and kindest little woman in the world, it's only the part of a man to shelter her at his own expense. Yes, I'll go."

But he was not to go.

"What! Off this afternoon?" cried Mr. Curle, the following morning. "No you don't, not if I know it. Look here, Everest, you can't. I'm going after the hounds, and you said you'd take the missus—"

"I know, but business is business, Curle. Awfully sorry, but I really must. It is important."

"Would not to-morrow do? Of course if it is a case of necessity——"

"It is. I have no choice."

"Not even between to-day and to-morrow? Say tomorrow then, there's a good fellow. I'll tell Sir Henry about the shooting, but we simply can't let you off today. You see I'm just starting"-he was all accoutred and his horse at the door—"and I can't stop now; and if this is to be Good-bye——?" He looked so disturbed that Everest, who told himself that a day could make no difference, yielded the point.

If he could catch the early train on the next morning it would do; he could make it do; and he would himself call at the Maynards' and explain how he had to cry off his shooting engagement. "That ought to satisfy her." reflected he, thinking of his aunt.

"We will call together," said Daisy, on hearing of the "We can drive over." arrangement.

"I think perhaps I had better meet you there," said Everest—"the fact is, I must have a tramp—vou won't think me rude, but I am rather out of sorts, and a good long walk over the country as hard as I can go will make me feel more fit perhaps-you see I have the doctor's orders to think about."—he wound up hastily.

Thus he was alone when an unfortunate occurrence took place.

He was emerging from a field-path which adjoined the high road, at a distance of about a mile from the Maynards' lodge, and had leaped the stile without observing the proximity of a horseman whom the hedge hid from view.

So close was the latter that his horse, a mettlesome chestnut mare, by no means tired out with an easy hunting day at no period of which she had been pressed, (for Willie Curle held discretion to be the better part of valour in the field), started and swerved violently, on seeing something shoot out of nothing beneath her very

nose! Her rider, who, as it chanced, was half turned in the saddle at the moment, looking to see if others were following in his wake, was instantly and rather badly thrown—the whole was the work of a few seconds.

"Hullo?"—cried Everest, running up to him. "Hullo, Curle? Not hurt, are you? Let me give you a hand?"—attempting to raise him from a sitting posture. "Awfully sorry," continued he, half-laughing, for the incident was not without its ludicrous side, "I had no idea any one was there, but—can't you get up?"—in a different voice. "What? Your leg? You don't mean to say," in the utmost consternation, "that you fell on your leg? Here, take my——" but a groan and a shake of the head precluded further efforts.

"Don't bother about it." At length, and with what was a very praiseworthy attempt at indifference, the unfortunate Willie Curle forced himself to speak. "I'm afraid this bothersome leg is broken; it—" he winced and bit his lips, "it hurts so. I can't get up, Everest, really. If you could—could manage to roll me over—ah! there, that's better"—with a sigh of relief—"and get out my flask, there's a good fellow. Never mind the mare; she'll go home. Oh, it wasn't your fault; not a bit. I was an ass to be sitting with such a loose seat, and of course I fall heavy—but it's no great matter. Charley Wilde had his arm snapped to-day. Fellows always get accidents. It's—it's nothing,"—wiping his forehead as he spoke, and feebly smiling up into the perturbed face which hung over him.

"Whatever am I to do with you?"—queried Everest, terribly at a loss. "I can't imagine how I could have been such a—but it's no use talking. We must get you home somehow, and get the doctor; but I don't see how you are to be left here all alone,"—and he searched the landscape for a figure in vain.

"I must be got home before Daisy sees me, whatever happens," quoth his friend. "It would give her a fit. She is not very keen on my hunting as it is. You'll have to leave me, Everest, and send a cart, or something. But I say, just fill my pipe before you go; it's really not so bad, the pain; and I think if I could smoke a bit, the time would pass quicker."

"There's nothing else for it, I'm afraid. I'll go as fast as ever I can, and be back with a cart and the doctor—but I wish we had a coat to throw over you."

"So do I—but we haven't," said Willie, philosophically. When they returned to him in rather under an hour he was still calmly puffing away, and explained with pride that he had himself refilled his pipe. He made no complaints—no, his leg really hurt less than it did,—and once in the cart he was fairly comfortable, his only concern being lest he should meet his wife.

But presently there arose another. The doctor said it would be a month or two at the soonest before the fractured limb would be out of splints; what on earth was he going to do and what was Daisy going to do during that period of weary inaction? He caught Everest by himself. "Say, old fellow, don't you think you could stop on a bit? You could run up to Town to-morrow, you know; and do everything you have to do, but—but, couldn't you come back? It will be so jolly slow for us two, all by ourselves; and you did say you hadn't any people of your own, none with claims upon you,—don't you think we have some claim?"

"Indeed you have." More touched than he could express by the wistful eyes and anxious voice, Everest turned his head aside and thought. This accident altered the whole position of affairs; could he get his aunt to understand that? Daisy had told them at The Towers that he was already on the eve of departure, so that his

change of plans would be shown to be genuinely due to Mr. Curle's broken leg and his share in causing it; wherefore, although no one could reasonably blame him for what had happened, he had that guilty feeling which every one must have who, however inadvertently, is responsible for another's mischance,—and though he would not trust himself to speak to Miss Adam in private again (for his burning indignation against her was in no wise abated), he thought she could hardly be so unjust as to misinterpret his anxiety to repair his misdemeanour by any means in his power.

When therefore he turned his head again to face the applicant, there was a smile upon his face.

"I'll come back, Curle."

"And I ought to be uncommonly thankful to have such people to come back to," he told himself at the close of the next day. "Can't think what they see in me. And here I am at a loose end still, and no one else—in England, at any rate—cares a hang whether I live or die. No, you harridan, you don't-" his thoughts flying off we can guess to whom—"you don't, whatever you may say. You would have torn me from beneath the only roof that cares to shelter a poor battered, good-for-nothing fellow, who is only a nuisance with his physics and fidgets. Why can't I get well? Four months gone, and precious little difference that I can see. Another month yet! How easy it is to say 'Another month,' when the man who says it isn't the one who has to wait and wait, eating his heart out while others get all the chances. What rotten luck it was!" A pause. Then: "Seems to me that Mr. William Curle, whom a certain elderly female turns up her nose at, might teach me a lesson at this point," quoth Houston Everest, dryly. "If poor fat Willie can bear his luck without a murmur, and only asks me to come back, and sit with him and hold his

hand, or whatever it is he does want—I'm hanged if I don't think Willie is rather a fine fellow, and all the mischief-makers in Christendom shan't drive me from his bedside."

This was the beginning of a curious state of things.

First of all, every one was concerned about Mr. Curle. The worthy Willie had not an enemy in the world, and, as soon as the doctor gave permission for him to receive them, it appeared that he had quite a number of friends. They turned up from all points of the compass, the Hunt sending a contingent which was in itself a credit to his popularity—and the Master was one of the most assiduous. They came at all hours, but mainly towards the evening, when the day's work was over; and though always ready to welcome any one and every one, Daisy took care to be at home when the light was waning.

Towards the close of the first fortnight however, interest or at least excitement waned; and then set in the period of which the invalid had experienced dread precursion. Now for deadly monotony, or what would have been deadly monotony if Everest had failed him.

And even Everest was not enough. He must have others; must have talk, and bustle, and fresh faces about him. He was no reader; never had been; books were the last desire of his heart. Daisy must find him companions—oh, it was no disrespect to her and Everest, but for their sakes as well as his own, visitors must be enticed to The Hollies, and amused when there. What about Beatrice Maynard? Somehow he took to Beatrice more than to her sisters; which was odd considering that Kitty was infinitely livelier; "But she is such a confounded chatterbox," argued he, when this was put forward by his wife.

Besides, Beatrice was Daisy's friend; and in private he told Daisy that the friendship was not to be despised. "Now is your time: and I say, can't you make a match of it between her and Everest?" he suddenly suggested one day. He thought the idea was his own, and that it was a remarkably clever one.

"They would not suit each other at all," retorted she, promptly extinguishing it.

"Why not? He is a nice fellow, and she is desperately in want of a husband."

"Oh, Willie, don't be tiresome. How can you know? I tell you she would never look at him, and for goodness' sake don't put the idea into his head. It would only lead to unpleasantness, and the Maynards would be so vexed with us."

"Would they, though? Well, I must say—but you know best, though for the life of me I can't see why they should object. Do they fly at higher game?"

"Of course;"—emphatically. "Beatrice has had half the men about after her; she is the heiress, you know; and is it likely that her parents would approve of such a poor match as Major Everest? If he were to show the slightest signs of an inclination—which he does not," with sharp decision, "they would stop her coming here while he is with us."

"That would never do, for every reason. All right: I'll say no more; it was only an idea of mine;"—and he dismissed it from his mind.

"How about Miss Adam?" demanded he on another occasion. "Has she done anything more than grin through her teeth at you? Has she ever again tried to bite?"

On this head Daisy was voluble and reassuring. She and Miss Adam were quite good friends now. She took Miss Adam in a different way; was civil to her and deferred to her, as the Maynards seemed to have got into the habit of doing; obviously the new method answered.

There had been a whisper, just a whisper, of Miss Adam's going away; Beatrice had confided that one day her mother was terribly upset and Miss Adam reticent, and Lady Laura's cousin, Miss Augusta Kenyon, had been written to, and there was a general feeling of insecurity and perturbation. "For really they are quite besotted about her, and say they have never had such a good time with their mother before, and all owing to this wonderful Miss Adam," quoth Daisy, in parenthesis. "I assure you Beatrice had tears in her eyes," proceeded "I will say that for Beatrice, she has not a jealous nature; though she used to feel Kitty's being so put forward. However, it all smoothed down; and as it was while you were so ill and we were all taken up with you, I did not hear much about it. I did not know whether to wish she would take herself off, or not. It would be a relief in one way-but then she might go and spread abroad things about us; whereas, if she stops here and we can get round her-"

"The best way. I told you so. So she has settled down again?"

"Oh, yes. I have heard no more of her departure. She is an odd woman though,"—musing. "Major Everest," (as he entered), "have you ever talked to that funny little governess-woman they have at the Maynards?"

"Miss Adam? Oh, yes," said he.

"She has got them all under her thumb. You would never guess it, if you only saw her as I suppose you only do see her, in company; but Beatrice tells me that she is —let me see, what is it she is?—'No ordinary person,'"—laughing. "The Maynards never suppose that anything about themselves can be 'Ordinary'; but I did not understand till lately that Miss Adam was to be admitted within the pale."

"They probably exaggerate---"

"That's it; they exaggerate, of course. Beatrice is one vast exaggeration. Every little thing is of such mighty importance with her that she broods and worries—but she has certainly seemed more cheerful since Miss Adam came. Miss Adam keeps her mother off her, I daresay."

"I tell you what, Miss Adam is jolly good company," burst forth Willie from the sofa. "I never wish for better talk and better fun than she and I had yesterday when I had her all to myself. And she has been at lots of places we have,"—looking at his wife. Everest's eyes were on the ground, he did not and would not see if a glance of warning replied.

"That always gives one something to talk about," said Daisy, after a moment's pause. "It is such a blessing when you can start straight off with Homburg or Monte Carlo. I do miss that here; the people in this neighbourhood, when they go abroad, seem to select the very dullest places,—even if they venture into the joys of 'Monte' they go from Mentone. Mentone is a sort of safe fortress from which to sally forth in fear and trembling."

"Well, here's Everest has been at neither," said her husband, good-humouredly. "So all of this isn't particularly complimentary to him. You might teach him the talk though, if talk's all that's wanted."

"Major Everest can talk of far more interesting things," quoth Daisy, demurely. "It is only between mere acquaintances that one feels the need of links to hang chatter upon;"—and she rose and passed out, throwing Everest a glance as she went.

It was merely a coquettish kindly little glance, but it moved him. Since his aunt's revelation, which had had so different an effect from that which she intended, many things about Daisy which had hitherto passed unnoticed, showed themselves in another aspect to Everest.

She was infinitely more interesting, she was even pathetic in the new light in which she stood. He regarded her with a sort of wonder that she was what she was. How had she achieved it? Not without a struggle surely; a steady, indomitable struggle, and consistently sustained resolve. It had been supposed that he would think the less of her for this?—he thought the more. He longed to help her, and to shield her.

But what was he? How little lay in his power, and how soon that power itself would be withdrawn! Very shortly he would be far away, beyond the reach either of her detractors or her defenders; beyond her call in the hour of need, if such a call should arise; and she would be left with only her Willie—a good fellow, but naturally unable to do what the outside world alone could do—give that support which could be esteemed disinterested. What was needed was not a husband, but a friend.

But even as Everest thus pondered, he recalled that such friendship might be rendered valueless by misinter-pretation. Already his own position had been challenged; and conscious though he might be of integrity and probity, he could not go about with protestations on his lips. Qui s'excuse s'accuse. People would smile if a solitary champion stood forth on the side of a persecuted woman,—but how if that champion were of her own sex? An idea occurred as by a lightning flash: such a champion might be secured, and through his means; a quiet smile overspread his features, and when he looked towards the sofa Willie was asleep. He rose on tiptoe, and stole from the room. He would not lose a day nor an hour in setting about his task.

With Beatrice Maynard, Everest was by this time quite on easy terms; not indeed on the same terms that he was with Daisy Curle (and had been almost from the first day of meeting)—but he understood the difference between the women, and was not daunted by it. Miss Maynard, reared on a stately altitude, with all the advantages of parental care and all the hereditary instincts of race, would naturally be more difficult of approach than a poor little waif, knocked about from pillar to post and trained to be responsive and obliging.

Miss Maynard would be instructed on different lines; with her self-restraint was inculcated, and frankness discouraged. "Yet she longs to be frank," thought he. Daisy had taught him this.

From Daisy he also learned that Beatrice was impatient of the conventions by which she was hedged in, that she felt crippled by family interdicts, and rebellious towards established modes of thought. His aunt obviously held that the eldest daughter of the house was a personage, only lacking opportunity to prove herself so. She had called Beatrice "High-minded"—the word had grated on Everest's ears, already tingling with vexation and animosity; but he recalled it now with another feeling. The "high-minded" Beatrice might prove a powerful instrument in his hands, if he could subdue her and enlist her in the cause he had at heart.

She was certainly not one of a flock of sheep.

"Nor should I have thought my aunt one," cogitated he; "but then she does not set up to be 'High-minded'. She would say of herself that she is only a very so-so sort of amiable creature, and so she is—no, she's not," hastily remembering, "she's a pestiferous mischief-maker, and cannot free herself if she would from the trammels of Mrs. Grundy. Contemptible!" striking the ground with his stick, for he was now walking away from the Curles' house. "Utterly silly and contemptible! And to suppose that I, who know the world as well as she, am going to be led by the nose! However, I showed her another story——"

and the stick tapped along quite cheerily under the new reflection. "Now, Beatrice, if I can only succeed with Beatrice," cried he, "we two together, as opposed to aunt Emmie and Mrs. Grundy—ha!——"

He had turned a corner of the road, and there was Beatrice in front of him.

He could scarcely believe his eyes. Now there was no need to go prowling round the precincts of The Towers, with his excuse handy and his ears on the alert. He had thought of calling if driven to it—but he had called two days before; and though he could again borrow a book or a paper for the invalid, and though he need not fear being coldly met, there was always a chance that he would not be met at all by the desired person. Beatrice was not always in the drawing-room.

Once indeed she had been there alone, and he had had a pleasant visit, and rather wished the same thing happened oftener. It was so much nicer having one companion than half a dozen.

But this was luck indeed! Here was his companion, and without his seeking her, and without his going to the house for her, without—oh, without everything that would have interfered and annoyed: he hurried on and soon overtook the fair pedestrian.

"Going for a walk, Miss Maynard?"

Miss Maynard was taken by surprise, and there was no doubt she was going for a walk. Her steps were not turned in the direction of the village, church, schoolhouse, or The Hollies. She could have no errand in view; she was making for the open country.

"So am I," said Everest, cheerfully; "I came out for a breather. The Curles never walk, you know. Poor Willie can't, of course, at present; but he hates it at all times. I wonder he doesn't get pulled along on a trolly to shoot! And his wife—well, I don't believe she owns a pair of

boots!" Obviously he meant to join partnership; he stepped along to her pace as he talked.

"How is Mr. Curle to-day?"

"Rather weary of his sofa. It is rough on a fellow like him. He has never had an illness in his life."

"I think I should like an illness," said Beatrice, smiling. "I have often wondered what it would be like to have nurse, and doctor, and a fuss going on—I forgot, Major Everest, you know only too well; but then I don't mean anything really painful or dangerous, I mean only what is called 'Serious'; something which makes people very kind to you——" she stopped, and he knew at once she was talking of what she had been thinking.

"Can't people be kind without that?" said he.

And then in an instant she drew in, and there was no plaintive confidence such as Daisy would have made with delight at such an opening. Instead, Miss Maynard laughed and turned aside the question. She only meant "Extra" kind; needlessly, officiously kind, as people were to sick folks: he perceived that he was not to catch her that way.

He tried the beauties of the landscape, and was more successful; she had the points of the compass at her finger-ends, and something to say about each. She loved the broad stretch of undulating country, with its wooded valleys and dotted villages; its gleams of water here and there; even its passing trains when not too near,—did he not think that one in the distance, with its thin white line of smoke, rather added to than took from the picturesque aspect of the scene?

"But I don't care much about trains, you know," said he, honestly.

"Except that they give life—life and movement, and a suggestion of things beyond," rejoined she; "I like to think of that flying thing, threading its way on and on, leaving behind now this, now that—I often wish I could go with it."

"Out of this happy valley?"

"Out of this stagnation. Oh, what nonsense I am talking!" Again she caught herself up, and again he saw that she was hampered by the precepts of her upbringing.

He was not to know anything about the "Stagnation" or to suppose the "Nonsense" had any sense in it. All right, he bided his time.

They must take their walk together, that was certain, however my young madam might feel; for there they were, road behind and road in front, and not a soul to be seen. A farmer's gig, to be sure, came into view as he thus cogitated—but what was a farmer's gig? It joggled along towards them, with three men abreast sitting in it. "Oh, do bow to them," cried Beatrice, as they drew near.

"Bow to them?"—he looked for explanation.

"Don't you know? Do it; and then I'll tell you. Oh," murmured she, as the gig passed, "you need not have been so demonstrative, the very slightest, faintest nod would have done; but I daresay they thought it was only the gentry's way. Farm lads are very rural about here."

"But what was the meaning of it?"

"Why, for luck," replied she, merrily. "If you meet three men abreast in a cart—or any kind of conveyance—you must bow to them, for they bring you luck; and if you don't bow, they won't bring it. We Maynards are terribly superstitious; and we wouldn't pass three men in a cart without bowing for the world."

As she spoke she seemed to grow younger. She prattled, laughed, and plied him with merry questions and conundrums; she recounted anecdotes, and finally burst forth into the broad Somersetshire dialect. He

could hardly believe this was Beatrice Maynard. There was a briskness in her talk which accorded with her gait. She was, as it were, mentally as well as physically treading out freely; he found himself heartily amused and engrossed.

Yet it was another kind of dialogue which the two presently fell into from that which Everest would have had with Daisy Curle. Daisy was either personal and egoistic, or—and he did not care for her in the latter mood—brimful of other people's naughty ways, and—was it not shocking?—of how they managed to conceal them. Not a tittle-tattle that was going but my little lady heard it, and was au fait with it.

Yet she could be wonderfully pleasant, too; she had a winning, enticing softness about her, which seemed to woo a man from himself despite himself; and Everest was loyal to her in his thoughts even now, even with the fresh air blowing on his brow, and Beatrice Maynard's sweet, fresh talk in his ears. He was loyal—but he realised that there was a world of difference between the two women.

He had felt something of this before. There was a subtle scent that Daisy always used; Everest could tell whenever she had been in a room; and in the sickroom, with its warmth, shaded blinds, and artificial existence, the whiff of perfume as the dainty little figure rustled about did not seem amiss. But he rather disliked it at other times. He was an open-air man, with no bent towards artificiality in any form. Had Daisy known it, many of her little devices and arts to allure were thrown away upon him; they did not heighten, they diminished her attractiveness. Where she gained was in her personality. She was essentially feminine; and he was so emphatically masculine that anything weak and clinging appealed to him.

Beatrice Maynard was not so much feminine as

womanly. Womanly she was, and weak too when weakness was a grace—but she did not flaunt her littlenesses, nor dress them up in dainty guise for admiration. Rather she hid what she could, and would fain have hid more than she could. To the superficial observer she was hardy and independent; and only those who knew her well, knew what timidity, what humility, what self-distrust lurked beneath that air of haughty unconcern.

To Everest she was now showing herself in her true colours. He had heard of her as generous and highspirited, but he had to find out for himself that she could be gay and bright and expand in the sunshine of congenial companionship like a child.

- "Do let us take the long path, Miss Maynard."
- "But-" hesitated she.
- "It is quite early still, and you are a good walker. I am sure vou are not tired."

She was not in the least tired.

She longed to go on, and looked wistfully at a turning by taking which a round could be made. "And a round is ever so much pleasanter than going over the same ground again," urged Everest.

- "Only-" said she.
- "Yes, only. Only a mile or so more. And it looks such a-such a nice road."

"It will be very muddy."

He laughed. She laughed too. Down the nice road they went.

And the muddy places were easily surmounted; they had only to get upon the bank, and he to lead the way, and give her his hand when it was steep and slippery, and disengage the sprawling brambles which caught her skirts in their prickly embrace, and hold aside the low branches while she bent her head-altogether it was nothing, nothing to mind.

A most horrible, dirty, and dangerous path Daisy Curle would have said; but Beatrice Maynard found it delightful, and the red sun setting over the tree-tops in the west, more beautiful than sun ever showed itself before.

Presently they came to a ruined cottage with an apple orchard, and "What is that?" demanded Everest, suddenly. He had never seen mistletoe growing out of an apple-tree stem before. "What in the world is that?"—and he eyed the white berries with curiosity.

"Our villagers would have been glad of it a fortnight ago for their Christmas decorations," observed his companion, demurely. "Mistletoe is scarce, even in this part of the world. I wonder no one has noticed that branch."

"We must have it then,"—and he prepared to clamber over the broken wall, but "Oh, no; oh, don't," breathlessly ejaculated she, catching him by the arm.

He looked round: her face was quite frightened; he stepped down again instantly.

"It—it is of no use now, the time for it is over;"—and she hurriedly moved on.

"It would be stealing, would it?" said Everest, though he smiled to himself, perceiving at last what was in her mind. "The cottage seemed so abjectly deserted that I forgot it might have an owner, who would have us up for trespass. Whose land are we on now?"

"My father's,"—reluctantly.

"Oh," said Everest.

"May I gather a bit of this holly, then?" inquired he, to pass off the awkwardness; and on receiving a motion of assent, twisted off several small and heavy-laden sprays, one of which he stuck in his coat, holding the rest in his hand.

She was prepared to be offered these last, but was not till the parting came. Then, "As you are dining at The Hollies to-night," said he, looking to see if he were to be allowed to go on, "don't you think"—and the little scarlet sprig made a meek and deprecating movement, the faintest possible movement, to attract her notice. She did not repel it. She waited. "It would be appropriate if you were to wear a little complimentary decoration?"

She took the decoration. And then she hurried home by a short cut and a side door, feeling like a culprit.

There was no one about; her own chamber was gained in safety, the holly sprig placed in water on the washingstand (a little out of sight, behind a basin)—and now to face the ordeal of the drawing-room.

All the party were assembled there, that was certain; and she would have to tell her tale in public, and stand a fire of interrogation and possibly rebuke-but what cared she? She felt a warmth, a glow at her heart, an inner exhilaration which defied antagonistic atmosphere. Suppose she were chidden and scolded? It was absurd that she should be so, and for once she would assert this. She was no child to be frightened; she had done nothing to be ashamed of: she would not care whatever was said.

"I am late, am I?" said she, entering cheerfully. "The days are getting longer, and it was so bright and fine that I stayed out."

"You must take what there is, then," responded Lady Laura, who had finished her own tea, and was not over well pleased at having had it alone—since Gwen and Kitty had also been out late, and she had herself despatched Miss Adam on an errand to the village. "I cannot undertake to have tea hot for everybody."

"We thought Beatrice would be in," said Kitty. had no watch between us, and she had."

"I went farther than I intended. The day was so

"You ought to have started sooner. You should not

be out alone at this hour." Obviously Lady Laura was in a querulous humour. "It is all very well to say the day was fine. The day is over at five o'clock now; and girls should not be walking about alone——"

"I was not alone, Major Everest was with me."

"Major Everest? You were walking about the country with Major Everest?"

"He overtook me a little way from our own lodge, and I could not escape. That is to say, even if I had wished to escape, which I don't think I did from a pleasant companion——" but at Kitty's ringing laugh a blush she could not control mounted to the speaker's cheek. She hastily filled her plate, and assumed an interest in it, as Lady Laura rose to the edge of her chair with portentous deliberation.

"Beatrice, repeat that."

"I went for a walk, mother, and Major Everest joined me. He has no one at The Hollies to walk with, he said."

"And presumed to—to—really I could hardly have believed it! And you to let him!"

"Why, we saw you!" suddenly Kitty burst out, laughing afresh. "Gwen, those were the 'Sweethearts' we saw! Didn't he bring you to the white gate, and stand and talk for ever so long before saying good-bye? We saw you, we saw you; and we thought it was one of the maids, for you flew in——"

"This is intolerable. Be silent, child." Lady Laura was now thoroughly aroused and in her worst mood. "But it is your own doing, Beatrice, if such things can be said of you," continued she; "if you behave like a poor unprotected girl, how can you wonder——"

"I am not wondering at all, except that Kitty should talk such nonsense. Major Everest wanted to see me back to the house, but I told him I should be there in a minute by the back way, so I sent him on, and——"

- "And 'flew in' as your sisters saw you."
- "I was late, and thought you might be uneasy."
- "Beatrice, this is dissembling. Uneasy? You knew what I should feel. You, brought up as you have been, to be walking about the countryside alone with a stranger at this hour! Disgraceful. Uneasy? I am more than uneasy, I am ashamed; it is what I never expected to have to speak to a daughter of mine about, and what your father will say-"
- "Met Everest," said Sir Henry, coming in. "He tells me Curle won't be able to stir off his sofa for some time yet."
- "Did he tell you that he had been walking about all over the country with one of your daughters?"
 - "Eh?" Sir Henry stopped short, bewildered.
- "With Beatrice. You may well look astonished. suppose I shall be told next that it is quite customary for young ladies to indulge in such escapades; but as long as I am at the head of this house——"
 - "Well, well,"
- "And all you say is 'Well, well'! You are no help to me; you never support me; I have long ceased to expect either sympathy or-
- "Where on earth is Miss Adam?" demanded Sir Henry, aside. He had been so blessedly free from these outbursts during the past six weeks, that the present one was doubly confusing and annoying; his first thought was for Miss Adam, and Beatrice was equally ready to fetch her-but this was not to be.
- "Stay," said Lady Laura, imperatively. "You shall hear me, Beatrice; little as you may like to listen. I cannot prevent what has already happened, but for the future I forbid your holding any intercourse with Major Everest."
- "Huts! She is going to meet him to-night," said Sir Henry.

As he spoke Beatrice shuddered.

She and all were aware that an invitation which had come for two of the sisters to dine at The Hollies that evening had been, in the first instance, a dire affront to Lady Laura. It had been characterised as a specimen of the bad manners of the times; as a rude hint that older people were out of fashion; and as an especial impertinence coming from people like the Curles to people like the Maynards.

But Miss Adam had not seen it so; was sure the writer did not mean it so; Mrs. Curle had not had the advantages of birth and education—("Yes, yes," assented Lady Laura, mollified)—and it was in little things like that in question that the lack of these betrayed itself. Miss Adam remembered a remark of her father's, who had had—ahem!—to do with horses—"They show the marks of the garron," he was wont to say.

"You do understand, Miss Adam. That is it, exactly—exactly. I shall tell Sir Henry; he will appreciate that. The 'garron'! Yes, indeed."

"Not being intentionally rude, you see, Lady Laura. A true gentlewoman would only be rude when meaning to be so."

Lady Laura, who could be very rude herself, was better and better pleased. "Some people," she observed, confidentially, "would say that a true gentlewoman is never rude, but that is nonsense. It is absolutely necessary at times; but I need not say so to you, who seem to know by instinct—so you think that poor Mrs. Curle—I daresay she did not mean it, did not mean it at all,"—and the matter was settled.

There remained, however, to decide which of the young ladies should accept the invitation? "Will any two of you come and cheer us up?"—Daisy's note ran. "We have Tony Oldcastle coming; so he and Major Everest will be the two extra men."

"Tony Oldcastle? Well, he's my friend," Kitty had put in at this—but the position of a favourite at home has its drawbacks, and the elder sisters were not afraid of their mother's decision. "Certainly not, Kitty," said she at once; and this having been announced, not a little had been thought about the prospective evening by both the lucky candidates during the afternoon, since it was an event to dine out, even at the Curles'.

So Beatrice as well as Gwen put it to herself; and it was to enjoy the thought of the unwonted dissipation that she sallied forth on her solitary walk.

But towards the close of that walk—not solitary, as we know—she found herself looking forward to the evening with a vast increase of interest and expectation. During the past two hours she had learned more of Everest than all their previous intercourse had taught her; for there had been grave as well as gay talk, and that kind of frankness which is only attainable between a man and woman when they are unfettered, not merely by the presence, but the neighbourhood, of others; when there is not only time in front of them, but space around them.

Such unrestraint was perhaps not absolutely new to Everest, but it was both dangerously novel and delightful to his companion. She had never known anything of the kind before. It was a chink through which streamed the light of another world.

No wonder Lady Laura's denunciations fell upon deaf ears after this; there was a little holly spray in water upstairs which acted like a talisman; and the thoughts of Beatrice were wandering towards it and towards the moment when it had passed into her hand—when on a sudden the scene changed.

Perhaps, had Lady Laura known all, she would not have been so cruel; she could be both affectionate and sympathetic if her heart were touched, or her partisanship enlisted; but there was a devil-may-care nonchalance about the culprit who was now under the ban of her displeasure, which was just what ought not to have been there. Beatrice should have been sorry, and confused; and had she sought to vindicate herself, and manifested a little distressed agitation over her enormity as seen in a new light beneath her mother's superior experience, all would have yet passed off—but silence joined to indifference was fatal. "After what took place this afternoon, Beatrice will not dine at The Hollies to-night," said Lady Laura, rising to her feet with a ring of hard decision in her accents, "Gwen and Kitty will go."

It is late and all have retired for the night at Maynard Towers.

A dull evening has been passed belowstairs, after the exuberant departure of the gay diners-out, who with much ado and bustle and showing of themselves off in their new evening dresses (to be graciously approved by Lady Laura) had betaken themselves off just as their own gong sounded—and now the weary hours are over, and Beatrice has not betrayed herself.

It was not so much pride as the shock of a new emotion which froze every syllable of remonstrance on her lips when her mother's edict went forth. Literally she durst not open the floodgates.

Instead she had clenched them with an iron hand, and with an air of careless unconcern which deceived all present, turned to the amazed Kitty who had emitted a scream of delight: "Then you had better take my black fan," she said.

Kitty had no black fan; Beatrice possessed a very handsome one.

"You dear! Do you mean it? Your beautiful, big ostrich fan; not the little horrid one——"

"No; the big one."

"You are good. Oh, Beatrice, do you mind?"—in a lower tone, as Lady Laura swept by. "It is too bad; but you do go to The Hollies ever so much oftener than either Gwen or I, and Daisy did say 'Any of us'; but——" looking eager and yet doubtful.

"You had better run and tell Jane. There is plenty of time; only you may as well dress now."

"And you aren't vexed with me? I never said a word to mother, not a word,"—emphatically.

"Who thought you did, silly child? You saw what did it? We all did. A mere nothing; but of course one is accustomed—now, Kit, run——" and the speaker smiled.

It was the smile of a spirit in torture.

We do not exaggerate; in humble lives, humble elements cause emotions as acute and bitter as contesting hurricanes in other spheres, and it requires as proud an effort to conceal the poor weak longing for the unattainable in the one case, as the fierce and vehement desire in the other.

In the evening Lady Laura relented so far as to reopen the subject. "Perhaps I was rather hasty with you, my dear. Your father and I have been talking the matter over, and he thinks you were not so much to blame; that is, that you could hardly have avoided Major Everest's companionship. If you had said so——" and here there was a pause of expectation.

"There now, Beatrice, you see your mother has made the amende honorable," struck in Sir Henry.

"And I am sorry for your disappointment," further proceeded Lady Laura, feeling herself very virtuous but slightly nonplussed.

"And you see she is sorry," said Sir Henry.

"Oh dear, oh dear!" cried Miss Adam, starting for-

ward at the moment. Her sleeve had caught on the knob of a little silver reading-lamp, Lady Laura's own lamp, which stood on a table at her ladyship's elbow, and in another second—but the disaster was averted. Miss Adam caught the lamp, blamed her own clumsiness, apologised to everybody, and, the commotion over, a new topic was started. Beatrice breathed again, and trusted that her silence and set face had passed unnoticed.

But now she was alone, and could sit and think in the moonlight. It was a lovely night, and how she might have enjoyed it—but still she could think. And she could dream, and hold the little holly spray in her hand, and wonder how somebody looked and felt when he saw her sisters walk in—and conjecture if the evening had proved to be blank to him as to her—and whisper to herself that such untoward events have been known to bring about the very result least desired, for that no true knight heeds an obstacle in his path—in short, she could indulge in all those fond imaginings and blissful musings which forever and forever accompany the first vague foreshadowing of love's young dream.

How beautiful the world seemed—no longer a fretting, disappointing, antagonistic place! Her poor mother—she thought tenderly even of her poor mother, who had missed this wonderful something which was trembling into being within her breast, and who had hurt her because she knew nothing of it. Kitty also had hurt her, going gaily forth in her stead—but that was also because Kitty did not know. None of them so much as suspected the existence of—say, of the little holly spray.

And though this night was lost, there was the morrow to look forward to, and who could say what its hours might not unfold? "Despite threats and prohibitions," cried she, gleefully. For she was no believer in bolts and bars, though they had just served her so ill a turn. Un-

aided, indeed, she was powerless behind them, but what was a man worth—at this juncture Gwen and Kitty were heard returning.

Quick as thought their sister was out upon the staircase. "Come in, and tell me about it," cried she, leaning over the banisters.

Her tone was so gay and good-humoured and her room so cheerful betwixt firelight and moonlight—the candles were not lit—that the two gladly turned in to prattle, full as they were of the events of the evening.

It had all been delightful. The dinner so cosy, the flowers so pretty, and Daisy so smart. Willie had been wheeled in, and his sofa brought up alongside of the dinner-table for the first time. He had explained that his doing so was the occasion of the "Fatted calf," and his health had been drunk with due solemnity. "And Tony would make a speech," cried Kitty, "and it was the most awful speech. We laughed at him till we cried, but he wouldn't stop. I am sure he had been making it up by the way."

There had been Christmas crackers of the most jocose description, Mrs. Curle having explained that she thought as Christmas was only just gone by they were still appropriate; and they had all "cracked" round, crossing hands and pulling at the same moment. "You never saw such fun," said Kitty.

"And Tony and I squealed together, till it came to speech time," continued she. "He was rather sulky with me after that for a little, but we made it up afterwards. And oh, Beatrice, the mottoes were amusing; here is mine," producing it,

If you are dear, To me as you, Nought can we fear So each prove true. "That's for Tony and me!"—in rising ecstasy.

"What did you do in the evening?" inquired Beatrice. In the evening they had the most tremendous fun. Daisy had decreed that there were to be no cards, because she knew Lady Laura did not approve of cards, so they had first played games—rather stupidly, as no one guessed anything but Daisy herself—but afterwards they danced; yes, they did, and who played? Why, Willie Curle. Willie was got on to the piano-stool with his leg sticking straight in front of him, and played waltzes. They had never heard waltzes better played; and so there could always be two couples, though of course one girl had to sit out. "But when it came to the polka, I was the girl, and I polked by myself," cried Kitty, "I did. I went round and round with the rest, and bobbed about-oh, I wish we were as funny and merry as the Curles, and didn't mind shoving the furniture into corners and dancing at a moment's notice."

"You could not have had much change of partners."

Somehow Beatrice felt a little chill upon her spirits. It all sounded so mirthful, so frolicsome, and apparently every one had participated in and enjoyed the sport, and no one had thought of her and missed her.

"Change of partners? No, that we hadn't. Daisy said, if she had thought of it sooner she would have sent for some of the Tomlinsons, but nobody seemed very keen," owned Kitty, laughing. "We liked much better keeping our two men to our three selves, and Major Everest does dance well." It was the first time she had mentioned his name.

Nor had Gwen any more to say about him. After Kitty had gone blithely away, the latter lingered a moment, however. "I do think, Beatrice, Daisy should be a little more particular. Of course, she means nothing, but the way she looks up into Major Everest's face——"

"Does she-did she-to-night?"

"Oh, yes. All the time. And there was something in their cracker—but it was she, not he—though he was laughing too, and I am sure it was something of the usual sort."

Beatrice nodded.

"She thinks because she is married she may do anything," said Gwen, tartly.

"And he the same, I suppose."

"I don't know what he thinks, but it is disagreeable. You would have thought so too, if you had been there."

Beatrice said nothing.

After her sister had left the room she sat still for a long time, but the happy look on her face was gone.

And Everest? Everest went to bed satisfied with his day's work. He had felt a momentary disappointment when his companion of the afternoon did not walk in as the Misses Maynard were announced before dinner; but the feeling was not sufficient to prevent his passing a merry evening and contributing his share towards it, especially as some letters which were found awaiting his return contained an intimation that he was peremptorily needed by his regiment, and could go out the following week if his doctor gave permission. His doctor should give permission; on that point he was determined.

"Of course you are dying to go?" said Daisy.

Of course he was.

Still, though occupied primarily with his own affairs, he would not neglect hers, and thought he saw daylight through both.

Moreover, there was the satisfaction of turning the tables on his aunt, with whom he was as much annoyed as he could be with any woman, and who so far had got the better of him; but now, if he could enlist Beatrice Maynard on his side, he could checkmate her and her ignoble plot. He felt sure of Beatrice. His own ob-

servation confirmed all that he had heard of her; and now it only remained to watch for an opportunity.

More than once in the week that ensued, that opportunity seemed within his grasp, and just eluded it. Nearly every day he met the Maynards—which it was easy to do, as he was trying to meet them; he called, and found them at home; he shot with Sir Henry, and Sir Henry took him in to luncheon regardless of Lady Laura's cold looks; he encountered the sisters in the village, and made his way theirs—but still the moments when he was alone with Beatrice were so few as to admit of no opening for a confidence.

Pertinacity must tell in the long run, however; and there came a day when Everest, having taken a late letter to the post, was in the act of popping it into the box, when the little door at his side swung open. He could scarce believe his eyes; it was she herself—Beatrice Maynard—in proprid persond. And, by Jove, how handsome she looked! That, however, was none of his business.

"Are you alone?" said he, hurrying through preliminaries. "I have so often tried to catch you alone, and you never are—never since that walk we had. You look surprised, but pray don't think me presuming; I have a reason for being so, indeed I have; and I know you will excuse me when you hear it; and I have so awfully little time, as I go to-morrow. I should have written, but I know you are not like some young ladies; you don't receive letters—I mean it wouldn't have done;"—all the above pouring out in a continuous stream, whilst she, flushed and tremulous, hearkened with downcast eyes and beating heart. All was so sudden, so unlooked for, no wonder she scarcely knew how to take it.

"Some of your people are about, I daresay?" pursued he, looking up and down the street. "Could we go where we shouldn't meet them? It's awfully bold of me to ask this, but, as I said just now, I know you'll forgive me, and I know you will sympathise with me, and I'm going so soon." In the tumult of her feelings she missed one phrase of the above, or rather she only heard a pleading, a beseeching, an impetuosity that vibrated through every fibre of her being, and fell upon her ear like music.

- "You are not angry with me?" said he, earnestly.
- " No. But---"
- "And you will grant me this favour?"
- "Yes. But--"
- "Then where can we go? I have it; through the woods. You often walk home that way."
 - "I was going to The Hollies."

"Not to-day," said Everest, with an appealing smile.

"Give up The Hollies for to-day, and——" and he prevailed. They walked in silence along the street.

It was not till they had turned down a side path, and passed beyond observation and the chance of interruption, that he spoke again, and then he commenced abruptly:—

"I am no hand at diplomacy and that sort of thing; but you are so good, you won't mind plain speaking, will you?"

"Oh, no," said she, faintly. Plain speaking? The plainest in the world was all she wanted.

"Yet it is rather difficult; it would be most awfully difficult with any one else. It was only when I heard on all sides that you were so—so generous and high-minded that I fancied you would understand. May I begin?"

A mute assent.

He debated a moment, and recommenced: "Miss Maynard, you have never known what it is to be under a cloud. No, that is not the right expression. I should say your life has always been what it is now, has it not?"

She smiled a little bitterly. Even at this moment the answer came a little bitterly, "Always".

"You can never look back on any period, say any phase of it, which you would mind being known, which it would cause you shame and vexation to have known? No, of course not. But such a thing may be through no fault—stop, I am putting it badly. Say, a person, a perfectly innocent person, may have what is called a 'Past' which they would rather not have known; and no one does know it, except one or two people—oh, dash it, if I could only get to the point—don't you think it would be a most awfully cruel thing to expose—I get worse every moment, you must think me an utter fool—I thought I knew exactly what to say, and it is all gone out of my head!"

"Never mind," murmured she, trembling, but happy.
"It—it doesn't matter."

"I'll try again. The fact is I've thought and thought about this, till my head is regularly muddled. I was so afraid of having to go away without a chance of saying it, and now I have the chance I go beating about the bush; but "—with a sigh—" I had no idea how hard it would be."

"Is it"—she flushed with the effort—"about yourself?"

"Myself?" He looked surprised. The idea that she could think so had not occurred to him. "Oh, no, it is not about myself; if it were, I should let it alone, of course. A man doesn't worry about such things; but what does not signify at all to a man, is simply ruin to a woman."

"A woman!" She started and looked bewildered. "A woman?" she murmured, interrogatively.

"Yes, a woman; a poor, weak, defenceless woman. One would think no one could want to—but then it's a woman who is trying to do it. And neither the one nor the other is such a woman as you. The one is gentle, tender-hearted, feels what people think of her most awfully; the other is,

well, she's a relative of mine, so I won't say what she is. Anyhow I want you to stand between those two, and I feel
—I am sure "—emphatically—" that you will not refuse."

There was a pause, and the answer when it came was so low as to be scarcely audible, "I will not refuse".

"I knew it," he cried, triumphantly. He did not look at her; it was well he did not.

"Have you guessed at all? Can you guess?" he now proceeded, with growing confidence. "Perhaps you have, and——"

She shook her head.

"Not? Yet the one on whose behalf I plead is known to you, very well known; in fact she is your intimate friend." But still he waited in vain for the expected reply.

"Daisy has kept her secret well," he said at last, with a smile.

"Daisy!" The blood seemed to whirl in Beatrice's head, her feet stood still upon the path.

"I ought to have said 'Mrs. Curle,' but we both think of her as 'Daisy' and it slipped out. Yes, it is of her I am speaking," said Everest, with an air of relief—and he rapidly narrated her story as he had heard it from his aunt, interspersing from time to time such comments as may easily be imagined. "And now you understand the situation," proceeded he, having brought an animated tirade to a close. "You, and you only, can help her. If you stand by her, and persuade your people to stand by her, she is safe though the heavens fall. Otherwise——," he shrugged his shoulders.

They were ascending a slight incline, she was a pace or two in front of him, and did not turn her head, but the words came at last, distinctly and deliberately uttered: "Major Everest, I will stand by her".

"I knew you would." He seized her hand. "I never had the slightest doubt of it from the moment I made up

my mind to put my trust in you. It bothered me dreadfully at first as to whether it were fair and above-board to repeat this; but my aunt said nothing about my keeping it secret, and indeed as good as threatened to spring the mine herself. Certainly she intimated that I might if I chose." Again there was a pause, on his side from satisfaction, on hers from that dead sinking of the heart which finds no relief in speech.

"It was an aunt of yours who related these facts?" said she, at last. "I suppose there could be no doubt about them? She could have made no mistake?"

"She could not. She met the Curles at a house—ahem!—not long ago; and I am ashamed to say tried what a whisper would do in order to make sure—I mean to make sure that the secret was still a secret. The effect was what she anticipated."

" I understand."

He glanced at her; she had hastily withdrawn the hand he had caught in triumph, and was now as far from him as the narrow wood-path would permit. He fancied her tone slightly forced, and insensibly constraint stole into his. "I fear this is something of a shock to you, Miss Maynard?" ("Is she going to fail me after all?" thought he, uneasily.) Then, aloud: "I know of course it must be so to some extent; you feel as she does, that exposure would be a terrible thing? You don't blame her, do you? If you had been in her place—but I can't fancy you in her place,"—he broke off suddenly.

"Major Everest?"

"Yes?" Now he was by her side again, his head bent, his eyes trying to search her face—but she kept it steadily averted.

"I accept the charge you have laid upon me," said Beatrice, looking full in front of her, "I do not say that had I known beforehand——"

"Do you see any harm in it?" exclaimed he, thunder-struck.

"Any harm in deception, hypocrisy?"

"But good heavens, Miss Maynard, is one bound to publish to the world one's private affairs?"

"One is bound so to act that should one's private affairs become known, they should not give the lie to that which the world already knows."

"As to that," muttered he, discomfited, "of course as to that—well, I did not think of it in that light. You think she carries it with too high a hand?"

"It is no matter; what I have promised, I will do. You have trusted me, and your confidence shall not be misplaced. If a friend is needed——"

"Thank you, thank you." Again he tried to take her hand, but she was too quick for him—"I will be her friend," she said in a cold, clear voice. "I will be faithful to my trust. When you think of us——"

"I shall think of you as her guardian angel. Miss Maynard, perhaps I ought not to go any further? We are so close to the house that—shall I go on, or shall I say 'Good-bye' here, and leave it to you to explain? It would only bore them, wouldn't it? And you will say I was hurried; but no, you won't," with a smile, "you are too truthful; so I shall have to write my own excuses. The fact is, I do feel most grateful to your father and mother for all their kindness, but leave-takings are abominable things. I have been so happy here among you all"—and he looked round somewhat wistfully—"it has been a kind of oasis in my desert; and now for the desert again. Oh, it's all right; I wouldn't lie on a bed of roses for the world—not till I have fought my way to it, at all events. And I can go with an easy mind, now that I know poor little Daisy has nothing to fear. I wish I could tell her—but that of course I can't. Goodbye, then, and—and God bless you, if I may say it. Sounds rather serious; but you really have been so awfully kind, and it is such a great thing to have got you on our side——"

On "Our" side? A parting stab; he might have spared it; but he ran on lightly:—

"Some day perhaps I shall come back to say 'Thank you,' but as one never knows what may happen, and I have got off better than many so far——"

"Oh!" escaped her.

He paused, arrested.

"I did not mean to be flippant," he said, humbly. It recurred to him afterwards the look she cast upon him; but as to fathoming what it meant, he was as little likely to do so as the birds of the wood.

"Good-bye," he said again—and rather wondered that she shook his hand in silence; and though he turned to make a farewell signal ere lost to view, she was walking on and did not see it.

CHAPTER VII.

GROSVENOR PLACE IS NOT MAYNARD TOWERS.

THE claim of London to be a good place to live in at all times and seasons has at length been fully recognised.

Its great pulse throbs on, year in, year out, with ceaseless vitality and vivacity. It is never still, never really dormant—not even when blinds are drawn and painters' ladders block the pavements throughout the gasping days of August; while even the fogs of mid-winter and the chilling winds of early spring are powerless to check the full flow of blood in its veins.

But London—vast, spreading London—roaring, rumbling London—steeped in the glorious sunshine of May, runs riot as it were, and sends its echoes far and wide over the earth.

In May the broad, strong current of existence, which sweeps on for ever, "Bearing its sons away" upon its breast, glances and dances on the surface, breaking into light at a thousand points.

In May—but why say more? Who does not know or has not at one time known something of the charm, the glory, the glamour of our grey old metropolis during the "Merrie month"? And while its humming ring of life may perchance evoke the fullest response within the bosoms of the young and gay, it must be a dullard indeed who remains untouched at any age.

It might have been, and probably was a reflection of the kind which brought a smile to the lips of one who was keenly sensitive to such influences, though fairly well *advanced in years. This was a lady who had stepped out upon her balcony to enjoy the fragrance of a warm, still evening, and gaze upon the outer scene. Flowers bedecked the balcony, an awning protected it from the sun; further, it was amply provided with low seats, and carpeted with cool matting. "I have really no fault to find," said Miss Augusta Kenyon, looking round with a critically approving eye.

She had come outside because she had "No fault to find" within. Her orders, which had been lavish and explicit, had been carried out to the letter; and the handsome mansion in Grosvenor Place, which she had inherited six months before (and which was then, it must be confessed, in a dirty and disreputable state, consequent on having being uninhabited for a considerable period), was now all that the most fastidious could desire.

Miss Kenyon had seen it in its primary condition, summoned builders and upholsterers, and vanished while it was in their hands. She was now returned to find a veritable palace of luxury.

Do my readers remember Miss Kenyon's name? Probably not, for hitherto no interest has attached to it; but now, by the exigencies of Fate, the elderly spinster whom we have barely mentioned as a distant relative of Lady Laura Maynard is to figure with more or less prominence in these pages. "Cousin Augusta," a shadowy being, a name and nothing more to most of the members of the Maynard family, is about to become known in her own proper person to some of them, at any rate; for on the summer evening on which we find her contemplating her surroundings with all the satisfaction of possession and prospective hospitality, she is awaiting the arrival of guests from the country—those guests being none other than the two young and unknown daughters of her old friend and correspondent.

Nearly a year and a half has passed since we last saw the Maynard family, and so dull and monotonous has been the interval, that we will not weary our readers with a recital of it. Let us take up our thread with the reception of Miss Kenyon's invitation.

"Dear! This is really, really too kind!" murmured Lady Laura, holding a letter in her hand, and commenting upon the contents before disclosing them, as some people have the provoking habit of doing. "Very kind indeed of Augusta; I had no idea she was in London; I shall certainly think over it,"—with an important look.

The look, however, failed of its mark; Lady Laura was given to small mysteries, and she had never yet succeeded in rousing any interest in her cousin.

Perceiving this, she was certainly not going to defraud herself now of the sweets of revenge. "Very kind indeed; and of course being my cousin, and a person I can thoroughly trust, does make a difference," continued she, in the same tantalising undertone. "The London season? I never had a 'Season'; but I would not wish to be selfish,"—darting a glance round. "I think at least some one might listen to me,"—with sudden asperity, perceiving that all the above had no effect.

"Hey? Oh, yes, but I must attend to this first;"—and Sir Henry, who had looked up, again immersed himself in a large blue sheet of foolscap, which he naturally felt contained items infinitely more momentous than any to be found in his wife's correspondence. "Beatrice, Gwen, attend to your mother," exhorted he, as he sank metaphorically out of sight.

"They would, if they knew it was about themselves," said Lady Laura, beginning to fold up the sheet in her hand, "but really as I cannot decide all at once, perhaps I had better say no more about it. Only you always complain if you are not told of things," added she, look-

ing towards them. "Here is an invitation from cousin Augusta for you two to pay her a visit in London. Ah! now you are beginning to understand,"—as Gwen, the usually phlegmatic, unemotional Gwen, sprang to her side with a cry of astonishment and delight—"now I suppose you will think a little differently of poor cousin Augusta, and perhaps own that I have some discrimination—oh, come, my dear Gwen!"

Gwen was all right; but what about Beatrice? Beatrice had made no movement, uttered no exclamation. Instead, she stood still, flushing and paling, with a curious mingling of expressions on her face; and it was only on being directly appealed to, that she answered hurriedly, yet with a species of hesitation which was annoying to her mother and inexplicable to her sister.

Oh, yes, yes; she would like to go; would like it very much; it was very kind of cousin Augusta, wonderfully kind—(Lady Laura's brow softened at this)—she supposed it would not be for very long? "It may be for as long as it likes for me," cried Gwen, at this.

"It is just as well Kitty is out of the way till it is settled, however," observed her mother, smiling. In her heart Lady Laura was almost as much pleased as, shall we say, either of her daughters. We shall inquire into the feelings of one presently; but Gwen's, which can be described as rapture pure and simple, for once found full vent in the presence of her mother; and so congenial indeed was it to the latter, that no sooner were the two alone than Lady Laura fell into a confidential mood.

"This invitation is the very thing for Beatrice. Beatrice has been very trying of late. I do not say she means to be so; indeed, I fancy sometimes that she struggles with herself; yes, I am sure she does; but none the less she is difficult, very difficult to live with. I could get on with you and Kitty——"

"We are two placid mortals," laughed Gwen, "and we have no aspirations. Our jog-trot life suits us very well; but Beatrice was not cut out for it, and——"

"And Daisy Curle makes her discontented with it."

"I daresay," said Gwen, indifferently. "Don't let us talk about that, mother; let us talk about London, and what clothes we shall need,"—and she ran off to those delightful and inspiring topics.

At the close of the conversation, however, Lady Laura recurred to a subject which had of late occupied her thoughts not a little. "What Beatrice needs is to get away from Daisy Curle," she said, decidedly. "I have often thought so, but I saw no way of managing it. At one time I did not mind Daisy so much, but latterly-I do think she imposes upon Beatrice," said she, suddenly; "and do you know, Gwen, odd as it may seem, I believe Shall I tell you how I first got a susshe bullies her. picion of this? Through Miss Adam. Miss Adam may not have behaved well to us-indeed I told Augusta Kenyon that I thought her conduct extremely strange, leaving us so suddenly, and without any real reason, so soon after she came—for I cannot believe that a climate which suits me could not have suited her; and, at any rate, a lady-companion ought not to think about climates -but what I was about to say was that she did seem to understand Beatrice. She seemed in a wonderful way to understand us all, but Beatrice in particular. And one day she said to me quite sharply, 'It is a pity that she makes a friend of Mrs. Curle'. I always thought so myself, but I was rather taken aback at Miss Adam."

"It was cool of her to say it."

"It was, as you say, 'Cool'. I felt it so. She had no business to make the remark; however, I—well, perhaps it was weak of me, but I thought it best to pass it over, and find out if anything more lay beneath? And it did.

She spoke out—Gwen, mind this goes no further; I would not have Beatrice hear it for the world—she said that by some means or other she was sure Mrs. Curle had got the upper hand of Beatrice. That things were not altogether as they seemed between them, and that Beatrice was often pained and vexed."

"Did she say that?"

"She did indeed. Had I known Miss Adam then as I do now—I mean had I known that she was going to part from us as she did, so abruptly, so unexpectedly—I should not have encouraged her to be loquacious; but at the time she seemed quite one of the family. She had an extraordinary gift of penetration, of that I am sure; and short as was the time she had to know us in, she—well she taught me things."

"It was a pity that she left."

"Yes, and no," said Lady Laura, sententiously. "Miss Adam in herself was irreproachable; but I think I learned how very uncomfortable it might be to have a stranger in that position. At any rate, I shall not try it again. Besides——" and she hesitated.

"Well?" said Gwen, curiously. It was not often that her mother was thus communicative, and, despite the exciting prospect before her, she was able to take advantage of the opportunity. Perhaps it was the same excitement which threw Lady Laura off her balance. The habit of self-repression was with her so strong that till now she had kept not only the above but more of the kind, together with countless ruminations on the subject, fast locked within her own bosom—and even now could barely and with diffidence unbosom herself to Gwen, the easy one of the family.

"I said that Miss Adam taught me some things," she murmured. "She was a very curious woman, and I never could find out what she did not know, or know

about. She seemed to think that I sometimes—misunderstood Beatrice."

"Oh, vou do, mother: often."

"And that she took up with outside people because of lack of sympathy at home."

"She doesn't 'Take up' with me," said Gwen, frankly "but we get along well enough. I daresay Miss Adam was right: I wonder how she found it out, though."

"They say 'Spectators see the most of the game,'" reioined Lady Laura, for once making an apposite remark, "but if it be so, I—I feel—I feel sorry for Beatrice."

A wonderful admission: Gwen owned it with a nod.

"Miss Adam seemed to hint that she would never have made a friend of Daisy Curle but for this," proceeded Lady Laura, tapping the table softly with her fingers; "if it be so, and if this London visit could make a break, we might perhaps start on another tack; that is to say, we might all try to be a little more forbearing and tolerant; though to be sure, you, Gwen, no one could accuse you," and Lady Laura laughed, "of being anything but amiable, at any rate to your sisters; you are tiresome with me occasionally-but, however, let that pass. Have you ever noticed anything of-any slackening of the intimacy between those two, Beatrice and Daisy Curle?"

"I have heard Daisy very rude to Beatrice."

"Have you indeed? And did Beatrice—did she ever complain to you, or to Kitty, or to any one?"

Gwen shook her head. "You don't know her yet. mother: she would cut off her right hand before she would sav a word."

"But that is nonsense," said Lady Laura, briskly. "Beatrice is under no obligation to put up with-did vou sav rudeness?"

"Downright rudeness. Very disagreeable rudeness too. Daisy knows how to put her finger on a sore place. Well. I'll tell you, mother," perceiving she had raised expectations, "it was about that Major Everest. Daisy took it into her head that we thought Major Everest admired Beatrice, and she did not like that. Of course, it was nonsense. Of course none of us, not even Beatrice herself, thought anything of the kind; so that if she had let it alone, she would soon have found that out; but she will even now—even though it is so long ago—keep making little allusions and jokes that Beatrice can't stand."

"I don't wonder; what execrable taste!"

"Oh, Daisy doesn't go in for taste," said Gwen, laughing.

"And you say Beatrice endures it, puts up with it?"

"Like a lamb-but I have seen the tears in her eyes."

"Yet if I say a word against Mrs. Curle, she bristles all over! Well," said Lady Laura, after a pause, during which each had meditated silently, "I am glad to know this; glad that there is some excuse, though it seems a strange one, for what otherwise would be unaccountable. It is perversity, of course. Beatrice feels she has made a mistake; smarts beneath it; but is too proud to own it. Poor thing! And as for that little upstart, after all the kindness she has met with from us, I—upon my word, I shall take a different line with her in future, and this London visit will be an excellent beginning."

Gwen thought so too. The London visit would work miracles; she glowed with delight whenever she thought of it, and if only Beatrice—" Just find out how she feels," was Lady Laura's final exhortation.

Was any one likely to find out? Beatrice was only fearful of betraying her joy. No one could guess what the past fifteen months had been to her, for no one but herself knew what ingredients had gone to form that bitter cup.

It was not merely that Everest had won her affection,

and put upon her the crowning mortification of showing it won unsought, but that he had laid claim to it for another while, at the very moment of doing so demonstrating that other unworthy.

She did not misjudge his interest in his friend's wife; there was nothing to revolt her integrity in his straightforward appeal for her sympathy and protection—but there was much to wound her heart. Everest did not know Daisy as Beatrice knew her; had no conception of the constant artifice and misrepresentation by which the former had gained an ascendency over the latter such as it was now gall and wormwood to think of-and it was not possible to open his eyes. Daisy's real character must remain to him a sealed book; and she could fancy that if amongst the absorbing interests of his present life, his thoughts ever turned to the two whom he had sought at parting to unite by such a peculiar and almost sacred bond, they would dwell with tenderness upon an ideal scene.

He would mentally behold in herself a watchful, powerful, reliable sentinel, ever on duty-while all the softness, all the tenderness of his dream would be for the unconscious object of her care.

Daisy had letters from the front of which she read aloud extracts—"The rest would not interest you, dear".

In reality there was no "Rest" worth speaking of, and not a missive but might have been handed intact round the neighbourhood; but when Willie, who was proud of being able to say "Everest writes so and so," suggested "Show them Everest's letters," there was a little hesitation. and just sufficient show of rebuke for a tactless suggestion to make the husband laugh at his wife presently. "Those girls will fancy he writes pretty things to you. Why shouldn't they see for themselves what he says? He might have been writing to me,"

She made some excuse, but she never showed the letters.

And now that Daisy was secure of Beatrice, Beatrice began to weary her. There was no longer the necessity for putting forth effort, and feigning what she did not feel. Nothing, she now perceived, would estrange her friend, while yet there was—or did she fancy it?—an alteration in that friend's demeanour. It was not that Beatrice was not as studiously attentive and considerate as of yore; it was not that there was any abatement of intercourse, or of intimacy; but a new element had entered into these. Beatrice had been wont occasionally to argue a point, or defend a position—she now rarely did either. She seemed to avoid controversy; and, if not ready with assent, took refuge in silence. Between intimates this timidity is out of place; one should not mind giving battle.

Again, there was—and here there could be no mistake—a cessation of those overflowing confidences which were still prized by Daisy Curle. They were not perhaps so precious as they had once been; still, they gave a zest to tête-à-têtes, which without them gradually became dull.

"And yet she will come!" cried Daisy, at last.

"And yet I must go!" sighed Beatrice, about the same time. Often her hands clenched themselves together as she turned in at The Hollies' gate.

But now to go away and forget it all! To be among new scenes, new people, new thoughts; and lull to sleep that vision of two people walking along side by side, the one shy, happy, elated—full of tremulous yet exquisite expectancy; the other miles away from her in spirit, and only cognisant of her presence as it affected a purpose in which she had neither gain nor loss. Oh, how could she, how could she have been such a fool?

And he to fill her gaping mouth with the sugar-plums

of cold approbation and praise! He had heard she was "So good," "So generous," he could "Rely so implicitly" on her; and relying, he had blurted out a silly secret, only worth preserving because it told against a silly woman.

It all seemed so petty, so humiliating. The revelation of a crime would have hurt her less, had it startled her more.

She would not be unjust to Everest. Clearly he was unaware of anything unusual in his voice or manner, and imagined that he was doing the right thing in a profoundly wise and delicate fashion, by thus taking a young lady of discernment and enlightenment into his confidence.

He had the air of paying a compliment while praying for a favour; he might almost have been a superior officer bestowing a high command upon a subordinate. The disgust of the whole thing!

'Disgust' was the only word for it. And to this disgust she had been bound down for fifteen months without intermission or relief; the very clothes she had worn on that black day she had had to go on wearing; the very spot upon which the disclosure took place must be passed and passed again; it was one long, ignominious martyrdom.

To pine in secret was the last thing my heroine was likely to do. The moment that she knew her love unsought, it was crushed and trampled down within her bosom, and that with so resolute a hand that it soon sank to insignificance—but not so the self-contempt which the discovery engendered. That could not so easily be disposed of; and that to her proud nature was almost harder to bear than grief or any softer emotion.

Her solitary comfort lay in the fact that what had passed was unsuspected by all, and that Everest's name was never mentioned in connection with herself.

After a time, indeed, it ceased to be heard at all; and it was just at this period that Miss Kenyon's invitation arrived, so that a more opportune moment could not have been chosen. Her heart literally leaped at the prospect.

"Then why on earth did you not say so?" cried Gwen, joyfully. Gwen flew back to her mother radiant. She had been bidden to find out her sister's inclinations, and had anticipated a difficult task; she found no task at all, and could scarce believe her senses. Even Lady Laura was satisfied for once, and undertook to announce the great event generally.

"What will you say? Will you say 'My daughters are going to Town for the season'?" said Kitty, to the full as much excited as though going herself, and to be sure why not? For when once a hedge is broken through there is no piecing it together again, and she might be the next. Do put it grandly, mother. Don't just say they are going to stop with an old cousin." Lady Laura absolutely laughed at the anxious exhortation.

Lady Laura was in the best of spirits, and the carriage was ordered early on the following afternoon.

We need not accompany it on its rounds, but will content ourselves with stepping behind her ladyship into Daisy Curle's smart drawing-room, where the following took place:—

"So they are going to Grosvenor Place?" quoth Daisy, easily. Daisy was not to be daunted, and she might have lived in Grosvenor Place all her life.

"A very nice part," continued she, stooping to pick up her visitor's cardcase, which had slid to the floor, "though it is not quite so central as Mayfair. We go to Dover Street. One does like to be in the middle of everything when one is only up for a few weeks. Willie and I always go to Brown's."

"To Brown's?" ("Now, what is Brown's," cogitated Lady Laura, swiftly.) She was not to be misled by a common-sounding name; she recognised Daisy's inevitable air when she considered a point scored.

"Brown's? Don't you know? The smartest hotel in London. The Fitzhuberts always go there, and recommended it to us. You have heard me speak of the Fitzhuberts? Lady Fitzhubert is-"

"I am afraid I really must go;"-her ladyship rose hastily, hoping to cut short the flow. ("When she gets on to the Fitzhuberts she really is insufferable."-mentally), "Beatrice and Gwen are busy making arrangements. this being rather a sudden move: but you will see them before they go, and if you have any commissions——"

"Oh, dear no, Lady Laura; I do my own commissions. Thank you so much, all the same; but of course we shall go up ourselves presently. We always go. I daresay we shall be there before Beatrice and Gwen return; indeed, I rather think-" she paused.

"Good-bye-good-bye."

"Of course we shall look them up in Grosvenor Place; tell them so. Or suppose you don't tell them," laughing; "say nothing about it; and, if we have time, we shall iust walk in."

But this was too much. Just walk in? Walk in without invitation or ceremony to another person's house, and that person a total stranger, and a lady of position, and—and her relation! If a look could have annihilated the pert little creature at her side, the look upon Lady Laura Maynard's face would have done so now. simply stared," recounted her ladyship, with slow unction. "It is very seldom that I do stare, but—yes, it was the proper occasion for that form of rebuke. No words could have administered one satisfactorily. She did feel it. She changed colour beneath it. And I don't think-no. I don't think your cousin Augusta need fear that intrusion."

Gwen laughed. Beatrice looked particularly grave. "What is the matter? Do you not approve?" said her mother, turning to her. "Surely, Beatrice, you do not think, you cannot think it becoming or proper that, because you happen to be guests in a house, your country neighbours are to be free of it, free to 'Walk in,' as Mrs. Curle suggested?"

- "I agree with you, mother, entirely."
- "Oh," said Lady Laura, mollified.
- "But what is it then?" demanded she, after a minute, "you look disturbed, uneasy——"
 - "I was only thinking---"
 - " Well?"
- "That—but perhaps I am wrong; I hope I am; I——"
 - "What is it, my dear, what is it?"—impatiently.
- "She may not have meant what she said at the first; she will carry it out to a certainty now."
- "Gwen," said her ladyship, Beatrice having left the room as she spoke. Gwen looked attentive. "Did that mean anything?" said Lady Laura, almost in a whisper.

"Oh, I don't know," quoth Gwen, indifferently.

We may now return to Miss Augusta Kenyon on her balcony, and she has not been there very long before the expected cab with luggage is seen heavily trundling to her door, when she hastily retreats within.

Shall she descend to welcome the travellers in the hall? She hesitates, feeling, despite her years and experience, almost as nervous as the girls themselves.

She crosses the room, passes through the open folding doors, and listens from the landing.

Perhaps it would be kind to go down, but—no, she will wait where she is; and accordingly the first sight the

two have of their hostess is thus described to their mother afterwards: "Cousin Augusta met us at the top of the stairs. She kissed us both, and said Gwen was most like you at her age. You wanted to know what she herself is like? She is very small, with no particular figure, but very smartly dressed. Her hair is quite grey, and she wears it like a French marquise. She makes up a little—at least Gwen says so, for I shouldn't have noticed it. She has a rapid, pleasant way of talking, and seems very lively and good-humoured."

"There, I really can't think of anything else to say about her;"—and the writer, Beatrice, looked round for an inspiration; but none was forthcoming, and indeed the above had only been penned by fits and starts, with intervals of meditation. "Mother will say I have not told her much, but what is there to tell?" added the speaker, after a pause:

"Oh, nothing; let's get ready to go out," decided Gwen, promptly.

Gwen was already emancipated, already casting off the husk of years; even little Jane, born and bred on the Maynard estate, who now appeared at the summons of the bell, looked a different Jane, and wore a knowing air. She was bringing forth new dresses from the wardrobe. "Let us be new all over," cried Beatrice, gaily. She meant more than met the ear.

The morning passed delightfully. There can be no more agreeable feminine occupation than shopping on a bright May morning; especially when one is being driven briskly in a nice little carriage, with companions all intent upon the same object. In and out of Bond Street, Regent Street, and Piccadilly trotted Miss Kenyon's brown cobs—"They are kept for this kind of work," explained she—and orders were given and appointments made at a rate of speed bewildering to the country girls.

"It is no use putting off," quoth Miss Kenyon, cheerfully; "you want the things at once; you want them to wear now; and if we do not make that clearly understood, your parcels will be arriving when your luggage is in the hall ready to go back to Maynard Towers. Besides, we shall have other things to occupy us directly," added she.

She had not waited till now to leave her cards about, and within a few days all three were plunged into what seemed to Beatrice and Gwendoline Maynard a vortex of dissipation.

It was in reality a mild vortex; it would have made votaries of the gay world smile in pure contempt; but it had a curious and almost pathetic effect upon the two with whom we are concerned.

They felt themselves other beings; they revelled in the feeling. It mattered not where they went or what they did, all scenes wore the same festal air for them; for all they decked themselves alike; and for years afterwards the sound of a barrel-organ playing a tune that recalled those summer days sent a thrill through their bosoms.

"You are so easily pleased," said Miss Kenyon, kindly. They told each other that it was she who knew how to please them.

By instinct she seemed to divine what attracted the one and repelled the other. Occasionally, Beatrice would be indifferent and pre-occupied, while Gwen was enjoying herself to the top of her bent; a whisper in the ear of the former. She would start. How in the world did cousin Augusta know? A little bird told cousin Augusta; and there was the carriage outside, why should it be wasted, why should not Beatrice take it and go where she would? "Gwen and I will go home in a hansom by-and-by, but we don't want to go yet," the speaker would add easily. At another time it would be Gwen who was yawning, while

Beatrice was eager and amused. How lucky, there was that nice young Mrs. Cazenove looking about for some one to take to her bazaar; would not Gwen---? Whereat Gwen would perk up on the instant, and come home later full of the bazaar.

The simple girls had never known any one so quick, so thoughtful. She reminded them, they told each other, of that odd little Miss Adam, their mother's quondam companion, who could not of course perform those same gracious, tactful, little feats, but who had always seemed to see when they might have been done by others. would never do to say so, but she does remind me of Miss Adam sometimes," said Gwen.

"I know what you mean," replied her sister.

"They are as unlike as they can be," continued Gwen, "but I should not wonder if Miss Adam modelled herself on cousin Augusta. Of course Miss Adam had a mincing voice; the only thing I did not care for in her was her voice, it always sounded artificial."

"It could be wonderfully sweet. But you are right; she was like all those sort of people, afraid to be herself; she had to try for a finer accent than she was born to. Still, I liked her," said Beatrice, musing.

"Oh, so did I-till she said she was going. I did not like her doing that; and when cousin Augusta was talking her over with me she said, too, that it was not fair—not 'Honourable' was the word she used—to come to us and appear pleased with us, and pretend to settle down, and then throw us over all in a moment! Cousin Augusta said she ought to have known her own mind before accepting the situation."

"I hope you were careful. Remember Miss Adam was her protégée."

"Well, I wasn't very," owned Gwen. "But if I wasn't, she wasn't either; we banged poor Miss Adam about

between us, and both agreed we never wanted to see her face again."

"I should not have said that. And I don't feel it," added Beatrice, after a pause. "Because we did not happen to suit her——"

"Oh, you think it was that?"

"I can't help thinking so, and that she put it upon the climate. She did have a bad cold—but she was not the woman to give in to a cold. I think she got moped; and of course ours is not a lively house——"

"We needn't bother about her now, at all events; she was nice enough while she lasted, and now she's gone." On which the conversation turned to other topics of more interest to both.

There were new acquaintances and new prospects to be discussed; new clothes to be tried on; new notes to be written; and if Beatrice were not quite so entirely engrossed with these as was her more volatile and heartwhole sister, she was not only ready but anxious to let them do their work.

One day she had a slight shock. It was but a slight one; still, she could not see a certain smart little apparition disappear within a doorway before which their own carriage was about to draw up, without a faint sensation of disagreeable surprise. "Do we particularly want to immure ourselves in a picture-gallery this afternoon?" asked she, quickly. "I know you are only doing it for us," addressing her cousin, "and it is such a lovely afternoon it seems a shame——"

"So it does," said Miss Kenyon. "Stop a moment,"—to the footman who had alighted to throw open the carriage door. "Suppose we let the pictures wait for a wet day?"—she turned to the girls; and something else was arranged.

"That was because you saw Daisy Curle go in there?"

said Gwen to her sister presently, the two being alone for a few minutes. "I saw her, too; but I should not have known how to get out of it as you did. Besides, I don't know that I should have minded."

"And I don't know that I ought to have minded—but I did."

So Daisy was in London, and might be upon her at any moment? It was as if a black shadow had crossed Beatrice's path, and throughout the remainder of the day it haunted her.

As nothing further happened however, and as no more of the shadow was seen for the next twenty-four hours, she was beginning to forget, when just as the ladies were returned from a long afternoon's outing, and were examining the usual array of notes and cards in the hall, there was a bustle in the porch, and a voice familiar to the ears of two of the party was heard inquiring if Miss Maynard were at home?

Miss Maynard herself walked forward to greet the inquirer, and presented Mrs. Curle to her hostess with what grace she could.

And if there had been only Mrs. Curle, Daisy might have passed muster fairly well. She had no right to come; no warrant for thrusting herself into an unknown house; still, the intrusion might have been condoned if the offender had not, as though to accentuate her lack of breeding, brought with her a friend, which friend she in her turn introduced all round. Miss Connie Gibbs had to have her name three times repeated ere it seemed that Miss Gibbs and Mrs. Curle were satisfied it had been heard often enough. If Lady Laura had been by!

Miss Kenyon, however, was not Lady Laura, and the party marched upstairs to all appearance harmoniously.

But what a Miss Gibbs this was!

She towered behind her diminutive friend, her air be-

tokening that but for the exigencies of custom she would have walked in front; and as though to intimate that height was no object with her she had increased that which nature had already bestowed by a hat of extravagant proportions, whose bows and feathers all pointed upwards.

"Yet it is not that," thought Beatrice Maynard, who was, as we know, herself tall, elegantly tall, and carried her inches gracefully. There was something masterful and aggressive about the stature of the newcomer which seemed to say "I am here, and you cannot get rid of me"—there was a determination to be noticed—a "Don't try to escape, for I am stronger than you," in the rustle of the skirts—there was, what was there not? Despite herself Miss Maynard was compelled to attend to her friend's friend, and leave Daisy to the other two.

Perhaps this was as well; she did not wish to talk to Daisy, and might have esteemed Miss Gibbs a refuge had Miss Gibbs been any other kind of Miss Gibbs. But that hard, rasping voice, and vulgar, confident air! What a mistake to bring such an appendage, added to the mistake of calling at all!

"We are staying at the same hotel," explained the young lady; "and as this is my first visit to London, I am just making Daisy Curle take me everywhere. She knows London—I know Paris. Not that she doesn't know Paris, too,"—with a little laugh. "Do you know Paris, Miss Maynard?"

Miss Maynard had been in Paris once—years ago, when she was a little girl.

"Oh, I say," Miss Connie Gibbs laughed anew at this. "What an idea now! Why, then, you don't know Paris at all! I thought every one knew Paris. It is ever so much finer a city than London,"—with a superior tilt of her chin. "Though I daresay you don't believe me?" added she, not receiving the expected disclaimer.

Miss Maynard, however, gravely assented; she had heard Paris much admired; for herself she could barely remember it.

"Then why don't you go again?" demanded her interlocutor, briskly. "Fancy we Californians teaching you over here to go about Europe! We think nothing of going backwards and forwards; but I daresay you have never been across the pond in your life? I used to go home for the holidays twice a year, when I was at school in Paris."

"What is that you are saying about Paris?" broke in Daisy's shrill accents at this—broke in rather quickly and nervously, Beatrice thought. "That girl never has Paris out of her mouth," exclaimed she, for the benefit of the rest. "She doesn't think much of anything we can do over here as compared to it. Now, Connie, you know you don't; you are une vraie Parisienne,"—playfully.

"Well, I don't deny that I am——" but ere the speaker who had bridled, and was about to continue the interesting dialogue, could proceed further, Miss Kenyon, who had been regarding her keenly for the moment, rose and suggested a change of seats.

"As I am the only person who knows dear, delightful Paris as it ought to be known, suppose you come and talk to your friend, Beatrice, and let me exchange reminiscences with Miss Gibbs? And how hot it is in here; Miss Gibbs, suppose we step outside?"—and she led the way to the cooler balcony,—"we shall be out of range of the other voices, too. Now do tell me," proceeded Miss Kenyon, with her blandest air, "I heard you say you were at school——?"

"In Paris. In a convent school, the best going. My father wouldn't have any second-bests for me. We don't hold with second-bests in California, where I come from."

"So wise of him. And convent schools are a perfect boon to-did you say Mrs. Curle was?—oh, I thought, I

beg your pardon, but so many girls are educated abroad now. I fancy I heard you say she——"

- "I didn't say so, but—well, she was. That was where we first met, she and I. There were girls from all over the world at that school. Any one who could pay—but my, you had to pay!"
 - "Very expensive, was it?"
- "You may believe so. But we didn't mind. My father said I was to have the best slap-up education that could be got, let it cost what it might."
- "He set a high value upon education; so wise of him. He had not perhaps had the benefit himself——"
- "Oh, he had had none at all. What did it matter? He made his pile just as fast or faster than if he had wasted his time fooling round schools. That wouldn't have done him any good."
- "So he stayed at home, and sent you to Paris. Perhaps Mrs. Curle's father——"
- "Daisy's father? Guess he hadn't much to do with it." A short, irrepressible laugh; something seemed to amuse Miss Connie Gibbs in the idea.
 - "Perhaps her mother——?"
 - "Her mother was dead ages before she was born."
- "My dear Miss Gibbs! But you Americans are so droll. So you and Mrs. Curle have kept up your girlish friendship——?"
- "Can't exactly say that. But I hadn't forgotten Daisy; though it's a great deal longer than it is civil to either of us to say since we met—till the other day. We said 'Good-bye' when she married; she married right away from the school; and though I stayed on another two years, she never came near us again. I stayed because I didn't want to go home; and I'm younger than Daisy besides."

And you only met the other day?"

"Ran across each other in the street. So now I am located with her, and she has got to look after me. I'm going down to the country with them presently, too."

"Are you indeed? How nice!"

"So now I see it all," said Miss Augusta Kenyon to herself, and she detained her visitor no longer.

"Oh, cousin Augusta, we are so sorry. It was such a pity we were caught like that. If we had only been out, or had had time to stop their coming in, or—or anything. It was too bad of Daisy," cried Gwen, as soon as it was safe to speak. "Daisy herself is bad enough, but that dreadful girl!"

"With her dreadful voice!" from Beatrice.

"And the way she ordered Daisy about—Daisy, who is always the one herself to order others! It was such a scene, such an exhibition, we were so ashamed of it," panted Gwen, breathless with pent-up ire.

"And you were so good," said Beatrice, taking her cousin's hand.

But Miss Kenyon made light of the whole affair. Everybody, she protested, had some tiresome people among their acquaintances; and those tiresome people invariably turned up when least wanted; and Mrs. Curle was really very pretty and faultlessly dressed. She seemed amusing too; while her friend, oh, she was very amusing indeed. She fancied Mrs. Curle was a little afraid of what such a very unsophisticated young lady might say—had they happened to notice that?

Dear, no; Gwen thought Daisy was rather proud of her grenadier; at any rate, she reiterated again and again what she was doing for Miss Gibbs, and how anxious she was that Miss Gibbs should enjoy herself.

"Oh, it may have been only my fancy," said Miss Kenyon.

She did not look at Beatrice as she spoke, or she might have seen her fancy reflected in the latter's face.

From the beginning of the visit Beatrice had perceived that Daisy was on tenter-hooks; that, despite her assumed gaiety and vivacity, she was nervous, distrait, watchful; and that her eyes kept wandering round to where Miss Gibbs sat.

Once or twice she lost the thread of her own remark, while trying to catch what Miss Gibbs was saying; while on one occasion, already narrated, she resolutely struck in and checked Miss Gibbs, who was merely running on somewhat effusively about her school-days.

Quite certainly, cousin Augusta had shown herself a keen observer in detecting that Miss Gibbs's sponsor was not altogether easy as to the impression so very outspoken a young person might produce—but little did cousin Augusta dream what Daisy had to fear.

"And yet nothing may come of it," said Beatrice to herself, and she shook off an unpleasant impression, and ran lightly upstairs to her bedroom.

She was lighter of foot and of heart than she used to be. Her past sorrow, a very real and humbling sorrow, had not been without its lesson, and upon so sincere and upright a nature a lesson would never be thrown away. All through those weary, uneventful months her character had been steadily growing, its better qualities deepening and strengthening, all that marred its beauty and detracted from its value diminishing. In brief, trouble, which either draws out the best or the worst of the human heart, had been divinely blessed to the poor girl, and though it is not all at once that shortcomings can be amended and bad habits overcome, even the purblind Lady Laura, as we know, perceived that her daughter struggled with herself.

Such a struggle merits extraneous aid, and this having

been forthcoming—and that just when needed most—behold Beatrice, the lofty and sedate, running upstairs now! A fig for Daisy Curle and her crankums! Daisy was clever enough to manage her own affairs; and as for that brave idea of Everest's, it had worried her enough, and she now bid it begone.

Of course she would keep her promise—though the man had no business to have exacted the promise, and though he had probably forgotten all about it by this time; but if Daisy Curle chose to take Miss Connie Gibbs about with her, and Miss Connie Gibbs chose to tell tales, and Mr. and Mrs. William Curle chose to vanish from the neighbourhood of Maynard Towers, this sequence of events would have nothing to do with a certain person who had agreed to "Stand by" another certain person under certain conditions.

Heigho! this call of Daisy's was rather amusing. "I didn't mind Miss Gibbs at all," quoth she airily to Gwen; "I was quite entertained by her, though I looked so solemn. I looked solemn because of cousin Augusta; but you heard what she said: she didn't care, so why should we? Daisy's plebeian friends are nothing to us."

"So we are shaking off the 'Daisy yoke'—the 'Daisy Chain' I ought to say," retorted Gwen, with what was quite a spark of wit for her; whereat both girls laughed together, Gwen feeling more at home with her sister than she had ever done before. There had been a time when she would not have dared to jest about the "Daisy Chain". "If I were you I should stop wearing those daisies in your frock, then," proceeded she; "discard your badge, and I shall believe—"

Beatrice took a pair of scissors, and snipped off the daisies.

[&]quot;What?"

[&]quot;----that you have done with her."

As she did so she also bade a mental farewell to a little bunch of crumpled and withered holly which was still lying somewhere in a hidden nook at home, and which had been kept, she hardly knew why.

It should be destroyed directly she returned. Times were changed; life was beginning anew; and now if Houston Everest were to come back from the war and expect a renewal of conferences and confidences, he would find himself much mistaken, very much mistaken indeed.

The next afternoon she met Everest in Piccadilly.

CHAPTER VIII.

"HA! YOU SCAPEGRACE!"

HE was looking into a shop window, and the ladies who came on foot might have tripped past unnoticed, but that he turned just in time to confront them; and, to take our readers into confidence, all concerned experienced something of the same feeling, a wish that he had not done so.

To stop and speak was of course unavoidable; but the surprise of Beatrice and Gwendoline Maynard may be imagined when in conjunction with their mutual exclamation of "Major Everest!" a cheerful "Ha! You scapegrace!" issued from the lips of their chaperon, and it was with her that the so-called "Scapegrace" first shook hands.

"Turned up like the proverbial bad penny," proceeded Miss Kenyon, gaily. "I saw you were on your way home, and thought a dutiful nephew might have paid his respects to an affectionate aunt on landing; but apparently the dutiful nephew thought otherwise. So you know these young ladies?"

They in their turn were regarding the speaker with amazement. It was true that they had never spoken to her of Everest, Beatrice from reserve, Gwen from sheer forgetfulness; still, it seemed odd that the relationship should never have been discovered until this moment, when it proved useful to one at least of the group. Beatrice could not so entirely rid herself of all past recollections as not to have betrayed some emotion,

however slight, in her countenance, but for this timely intervention.

"Well, and so you have had a real honest wound this time," continued the elder lady, in tones of approbation; "and here you are, none the worse for it apparently; though now I look at you—my dear Houston," suddenly, "I do hope you have not been really bad, have you?"—in altered accents. "No one wrote, you know; and though I saw your wound mentioned in the papers——"

"It was not worth writing about," said he, quickly. "It was bad luck, but I should have got over it all right if it had not been for—however, you can hear the rest any time. We only landed yesterday, and of course I was coming to look you up; I have got your last letter here," patting his breast pocket, "and—and, it was awfully good of you to write so often, and to send those things."

"They reached you, did they? Now, come back with us; come back to luncheon; we are on our way home, and we can't stand talking here blocking up the way."

Major Everest was however engaged for luncheon.

"Dine with us then," said his aunt, promptly. As she spoke she looked at him with a roguish, significant eye, and he understood that he had to go.

"Eight o'clock, and be punctual. We had been going to a charity concert, but charity begins at home, and anyhow I am thankful to be off it. These endless charity affairs get upon one's nerves;" nodded the lively lady, suffering herself to be impelled onwards by the passing stream.

Barely however had she taken a few steps, than "Just wait one moment for me," cried she to her young companions, and was back by her nephew's side, ere he had sufficiently collected himself to do more than mechanically move in the opposite direction. "Houston,

one word. Let bygones be bygones. We parted in anger, but that old story is forgotten and forgiven, is it not? Dear Houston," she laid her hand on his arm, and looked into his face with wistful tenderness, "when I saw you just now, and seemed so heartless, it was because—because—"

"All right, my dear aunt, I understand."

"I could not trust myself to be natural. I am so glad, so thankful. And dear fellow, my home, you know, is always yours; and directly the girls go——"

"Don't turn them out for me."

"But why not? However, we can talk over that presently. Only I wanted just to say that of course they know nothing, absolutely nothing of that mad prank of mine—it has caused me vexation enough, and you won't——?"

He smiled, laughed; and she returned to the waiting pair.

Our readers now know who Miss Adam was. Perhaps they have suspected all along; have seen through the thin veil which we endeavoured to throw over her personality; and are scouting the idea that she could have evaded recognition long before this at the hands of the two beneath her roof?

But we would suggest in the first place how difficult it is to eradicate an idea once implanted in the human breast. Lady Laura Maynard's cousin was a distinct and thoroughly well-defined personage in the family imagination. She was obviously a woman of world-wide experience, and an oracle on many points considered by Lady Laura to be of first-rate importance. This oracle had recommended a humble lady-companion—and there was nothing about Miss Adam to create any suspicion of her being anything but Miss Adam. People do not study attentively the features of unpretending middle-aged

individuals, whose looks are nobody's business; and the impression left by such a one when she vanishes from the scene is quickly wiped out.

Had the Maynards met Miss Adam a year and a half later, as they were accustomed to behold her at Maynard Towers, in her flat cap or close bonnet, with the brown ringlets shaking on either cheek, with shawl and mittens, and—crucial test—without certain teeth, whose re-appearance altered her face even more than the abandonment of the ringlets—they would without doubt have recognised her; but had they been asked to describe what she was like without seeing her, they would have been unable with any accuracy to do so—and we know that a vague, indefinite something about their handsome, sprightly, important cousin, which recalled her lowly protegée, was felt to be so absurd by both Beatrice and Gwen that they laughed together over the odd coincidence.

"It is the way she throws about her hands," said Gwen one day; but yet that very "Way" hardly seemed the same, when one pair of hands, white and plump, flashed with gems—while the other was protected from cold and problematical chilblains by mittens which extended half-way down the fingers.

Miss Kenyon's knowledge of themselves and of their home was easily accounted for, and accordingly she did not attempt to disguise it.

- "Your mother has always written about you all quite frankly," she said.
 - "Oh, we know she pours out to you," laughed Gwen.
- "And she has always been so kindly urgent that I should visit Maynard Towers," observed their cousin, once. She could not resist saying it, and looking hard to see if the remark produced any unusual result.

It did not; they only returned straightforward glances, and Beatrice said earnestly, "I hope you will come";

adding after a pause, "we should be so glad to have you, now that we know you, cousin Augusta".

"All the same, I have done you an ill turn," said cousin Augusta to herself with a sigh.

She had meant so well, and bungled her good intentions so badly. There is no need to make a further mystery of what these were. Miss Kenyon was rich, and disposed to make her nephew Houston Everest her heir; but she desired him to marry, and rumour said that he was a determined bachelor, who when he sought female society confined his attentions to married women.

This was bad, but worse was to follow; for recently a specific report had reached her ear of his being entangled in the charms of Daisy Curle.

We know how much this intimacy had been exaggerated and misinterpreted; but Miss Kenyon, who was aware of Daisy's antecedents and had no great faith in her respectability, was alarmed and indignant. Could she do nothing to put a stop to the affair? Everest was not a man to brook interference, least of all if it proceeded from a relation upon whom he was in a manner dependent. The very fact that he owed much to her would make his pride up in arms if she attempted remonstrance, while authority was of course out of the question.

To tell him what she knew of the Curles' former history, moreover, would avail nothing—since he would probably disbelieve it unless supported by proof; added to which, there was the chance of his not caring, even supposing he did believe.

She was at her wits' end, helpless and powerless; when a note was received one day from the unmanageable object of her solicitude, whose postmark was familiar—and all at once an idea suggested itself.

Three Maynard girls. Three to choose from. And

by their mother's description, they must be as different in disposition as in appearance; while certainly, yes certainly, there must be good looks and good qualities somewhere among the three. Surely this was Houston's chance?

And now, if she had only let the chance alone! But she had burned to have a finger in the pie, and Lady Laura's desire to have a resident lady-companion selected and despatched to Maynard Towers, arriving as it did at the critical moment, seemed to point the way with an unmistakable finger.

"And but for me and my folly all might have gone well," lamented she, now. "He was taken with Beatrice. He could not help being so; she is a noble creature, ignobly fettered and bound by the restrictions of a life that is too small and narrow for her. She would expand like a flower in the sun, were she able to emerge from it, and have the free use of her abilities and energies. She would do more than make Houston happy; she would elevate him, raise him to her own level. Dear Houston is as good as he knows how to be; but the best that is in him has never been drawn out; for hitherto he has been as unfortunate in his way as Beatrice in hers. He has been neglected; she has been overdone with care and supervision."

A pause; then, "Beatrice longs to be loved, and no one in her own home has the capacity for affection she needs and merits. They do not appreciate her; do not see into the depths which lie below that crust of gravity and reserve; they think her ill-tempered—and it is true that she has not Gwen's easy amiability nor Kitty's childish gaiety; but she has qualities far, far surpassing theirs, and infinitely desirable in a wife for such a man as Houston. Dear Houston! I would not say a word against him, but he does need some one to lean upon, to

consult with, to help him in forming judgments and adopting resolutions. He lacks decision of character. When not intent on his military duties he lets himself drift—and some day he will drift into waters too deep for him. The only salvation for such a man is in an honest, disinterested attachment for a good woman, a woman who would not only inspire but retain it. . . . If Houston could love Beatrice now, he would end by worshipping her. She would create in his bosom a feeling which does not now exist. . . . She—but what is the use of all this castlebuilding?"—suddenly the dreamer who had been lost in the above reverie drew an impatient sigh, and rose from the low seat into which she had sunk.

"What is the use? I have known this for long; I saw it directly I saw the two together, and read that in her face which—ah, how long it is since I felt what Beatrice Maynard felt that day at Maynard Towers! She was unconscious of it herself, the first faint stirrings of that 'Breath divine' upon the placid surface of the virgin soul—pah! how sentimental I grow!—and vet is there anything, can there be anything like it on earth? I doubt if even the full flood of an absorbing passion irradiating all things seen and unseen is more exquisite than that tiny dawning shaft of light, which sends its first shiver through the veins. . . . It did through hers: Beatrice felt it, and did not know it that day. . . . Still more, afterwards. I could always tell when she had met him; she was glowing, animated, lifted above every petty annovance and unpleasantness. Her mother might say. what she chose, and there would be no sharp response, no vexed brow. How blind they all were! The only person who saw, and she but dimly and from jealousy, was Peggy the street girl. Mrs. William Curle exerted herself in consequence; and that poor infatuated nephew of mine—it makes me hot and cold to think of it—instead of seeing through the woman and shaking himself free of her, deliberately played into her hands, aided and abetted by his idiot of an aunt, . . . Heigho! How wise we are when a thing is done and can't be undone," moralised Miss Kenyon, walking up and down the room; "we see our mistakes and blunders, and set to work to commit them carefully over again! What else did I invite Houston here for? I could have waited; and it would have been better to have waited to see him in this house. Beatrice has cooled towards him. She understood his departure; and, true to herself, accepted all that it meant. Some pain and disappointment she must have felt,—yet how perfectly she concealed it; not a breath of suspicion was aroused. All was at an end for her; and how long or how short a time it took to forget, no one will ever know-but that she has forgotten or at least overcome remembrance, and is now another creature all the better for a dearly-bought experience, is very plain. Why should I try to disturb her peace, and rekindle the dead spark?"

"Well, I couldn't help it, I had to ask the man," quoth Miss Kenyon, petulantly. "One can't be odd and unnatural just because one happens to be au fait with a certain untoward little episode. They need not meet often; and if Houston has any sense, he will keep out of our way for a bit. Of course he will; he is not over anxious to come as it is; and if there are no future engagements made, and he has only a general invitation to the house, the girls' visit will be over, and they will have seen him once or twice, and there will be an end of it." So saying she rang for her maid, and proceeded to dress for dinner.

"Here you are. Good boy to be punctual. No one is down but me. Now what do you think of this?" said Everest's hostess, glancing round complacently, as he

was announced into her sumptuous drawing-room, "rather grand, is it not? I am still foolish enough—though why foolish?—call it practical and sensible enough to enjoy living in a fine house, and being able to welcome my nephew to it. My dear Houston, I hope you are as pleased as I that your old aunt's wanderings are over, and that henceforth she is to be known as a respectable and fairly stationary citizen of—no, that doesn't round off well, say as a Londoner pure and simple."

- "You will make a very good Londoner," said he.
- "One does like to have rest for the sole of one's foot in one's old age, Houston."
 - "Old age?" He looked at her humorously.
 - "Well, flatterer?"
 - "Nothing will ever make you old, my dear aunt."
- "Not even a wig and mittens? But, hush!"—putting her finger to her lips. "We must not begin on that; they will come in directly; let us talk about the house."
 - "It is a splendid house."
- "Is it not? And though I always knew I was to have it, one could never tell when; for my poor old cousin having lived so long, there seemed no reason why he should not go on living. I suppose you too appreciate having a roof over your head once more?"
- "Oh, we had roofs of a sort—occasionally. I must say I liked the sky better."
 - "At night? To sleep under?"
- "Nothing like it," said he, readily. "A tent is a beastly stuffy affair; and there is something in the air out there that makes you sleep like a top, especially after a long day's march——"
- "Come in, my dears, here is a soldier already longing to be back upon the march!" cried Miss Kenyon, as the door opened to admit the sisters at this moment; and

though the words and the merry look that accompanied them seemed only an easy method of including the new-comers in a conversation already started, they were not uttered without design. "Somehow, whatever one hears from others, and whatever one reads in the papers, it all sounds quite different when you have your own man home, and he tells you what happened to himself," proceeded she. "So now is your opportunity, Houston. You will never be made so much of again as you will tonight by us three. When we have wrung you dry——"

"You will throw me aside like a sucked orange?"

"Just so. A very apposite simile."

He was given to understand however that he was not yet sucked; and as the little party descended to the diningroom, and seated themselves round a table fragrant with fresh flowers, and luminous with gleaming silver, he could not but own a pleasant sensation in being thus welcomed and feasted.

A man is seldom better company than when drawn out and encouraged by an audience of women. He may then be as egoistic and bombastic as he chooses—not that he is so, for oftener he is singularly modest—but he has a free hand; he does not feel himself under the necessity of be-littling every event and episode in which he has taken part, as he would were others of his own sex present.

He can relate things as they happened, and throw in touches, small personal touches, which are eagerly drunk in by the sympathetic feminine ear; and if only he will own to a sense of weakness or of loneliness, how utterably soft and compassionate is every eye.

The wily fellow knows this, and trades upon it. Be sure that he does not confess to having opened his packet of tobacco before his letters, when the mail came in; or that he waited to peruse the latter till he had had his dinner. As to these trifling details he is silent, and the fair

devotees can go on worshipping in peace. Houston Everest had expressed a very real dislike to and contempt for the pose of a hero when conscious of its being a mockery,—but since going out to South Africa for the second time, fortune had so far befriended him that if Daisy Curle were now to brand him by the term which had once been so odious, it would have been considerably less inapplicable.

He had seen some hard fighting, and much of the tug and strain of war; he had been mentioned in despatches; and the wound which he had received was serious enough to make it doubtful whether he would ever be able to command his regiment, the *ultima thule* of his ambition.

Ride a horse he certainly could not at the present time; and should it prove that this difficulty was not to be surmounted, farewell to all military advancement. The outlook was gloomy enough to warrant any amount of womanly sympathy; and though that, the actual point on which the poor fellow stood in need of it, was kept rigidly out of sight, he was human enough to feel that the little furore about him was no longer laughable. In short, Everest enjoyed himself, and a tranquil sense of well-being stole into his bosom as the hours passed.

It was good to be home; good to have this sort of home to come to; his aunt was no longer in his eyes a meddle-some tale-bearer with malicious propensities; neither was she an annoying old maid with a turn for making herself ridiculous; she was an exalted personage who had a right to dally with eccentricity as she chose, but she—and so much the better—had apparently repented of her whim, and would not repeat it.

How charming she looked at the head of her table—richly dressed, gracious, tactful, beneficent. Old lace and diamonds become grey hair; and the roses that surmounted the latter were not more delicately pink

than were the smooth, soft cheeks in which the wrinkles were but faint as yet.

Everest's heart warmed to his aunt; that morning he had thought of her with a certain hesitation.

True, she had been his faithful correspondent and benefactress while at the front—but one can feel a sense of obligation without any glow of affection; and the glow on the present occasion was missing, or rather had been missing till contact struck as it were the spark.

As for the young ladies, they were very nice indeed. "What girls are like our English girls?"—cried he in his heart, wondering and delighted with their grace, their beauty, the music of their voices and laughter.

Beatrice wore a robe of shining gauze, beneath which there gleamed folds of satin; he looked at it with a strange kind of pleasure in its perfection, and when by accident he trod upon it, almost cursed himself.

A clumsy brute—but how little she seemed to mind; the fragile thing was tossed out of his way as though it, not he, were the offender.

Was Beatrice herself altered? He had no very clear recollection of the former bearer of the name, except that she was, in common phrase, "A good sort," and that he had always felt at home with her. Had they not been rather friends at one time? Of course. And confidential? Of course. But now they met on quite another footing; and there were no references to Somersetshire walks and talks, not the faintest gleam of intelligence in her eye.

This was all to the good; he disliked mysterious affinities and that kind of thing; and as he sat by himself luxuriously sipping his claret, after the ladies had left the room, he meditated with tranquil satisfaction on the turn events had taken.

"It was all uncommonly disagreeable and explosive

when I went out," thought he. "That nonsense of aunt Emmie's might have turned out much worse than it did. 'Pon my word, I thought I was leaving a mine behind me, that might be fired at any moment; and I was thankful to get off and out of the way. That's the thing to do,"-selecting a dry biscuit, and leaning back to munch and sip. "Never mix yourself up in an imbroglio, if you can help it. Bolt. Bolt. and come back when the sky is clear. Daisy is perfectly competent to manage her own affairs, clever little puss that she is; and I suspect I was a bit of an ass to worry myself about them. It all came of my being out of sorts down there; and of course the Curles were most awfully good to me; but if I had had any sense, I should have seen that the best thing I could do for them in return was to hold my tongue. Confound it, I wish I had. What the dickens was it to me?" rose from his chair, having had enough claret.

"Seems to me I must have shown up in rather a queer light to this Miss Beatrice. I can't think what possessed me to blab to her of all people. As good as saying Daisy and I were—oh, botheration, I wonder what she thought? But," with a sigh of relief, "she isn't the girl to think those things; besides, any one could see that poor little Daisy is straight enough at bottom. I shall keep out of her way, though; at least, I think I shall. Of course, if they trouble themselves about me—but I don't suppose they will. Daisy will have had a dozen flirtations since my day, and I shan't take any steps towards letting them know I'm back. They can see for themselves, if they want to see. It was a nice part of the country though," he mused, half regretfully.

He was not now however in the friendless and homeless condition he had been when The Hollies showed itself as a haven of refuge; and, though retaining a grateful recollection of it in that aspect, vistas had opened in other directions; while the change in his aunt's fortunes might also affect him. Altogether the Curles, kind, hospitable people—people who had nursed and coddled and befriended him—people upon whom he had no claim, and yet who could not have done more if he had been their nearest and dearest relation—the Curles, we say, despite the gratitude that ought to have attached to their name, and that did in a measure attach to it, were, and it was fruitless to deny it, now beheld in a new light.

He could see some justification for his elderly relative's annoyance at his being so closely associated with them. Women, he told himself, made social status a sort of god; and of course poor Daisy, of course she was not like those high-bred Maynard girls. She could be vulgar; she was most amusing when she was vulgar; still, he saw what his aunt meant.

Daisy's notions of morality, too. Well, poor thing, how should she have any particular notions? It said something, it said a good deal for her that she was what she was.

"What is more, I do believe she has a notion of being religious," said Everest, staring out of the window, for he had strolled thither to breathe the fresher air. "She was always putting little bits of 'pi' into her letters. Daisy's not a swagger character, not like this Beatrice girl." He stopped short, whistled softly under his breath, and presently went upstairs.

Considerably to his surprise, the voices which greeted his ear on opening the drawing-room door were not all feminine voices; and on entering, he found there was an addition to the party in the shape of an extremely smart-looking and good-looking man considerably younger than himself, who rose at his approach and was presented as Mr. Anthony Oldcastle.

"You have met Mr. Oldcastle before, and he remembers you, though perhaps you have forgotten him," said Miss Kenyon, easily.

"You were stopping in our part before you went out," appended the newcomer.

"Oh, indeed?" said Everest, stiffly. "Oh, ah, yes, I remember;" after a moment. "In Somerset, wasn't it?" He was not over pleased to find what he had come to look upon as his own preserves thus poached upon, and that by an intruder who regarded him with a friendly, interested eye, as though from a standpoint of family intimacy.

"We were just inquiring if you had ever met in South Africa," continued the hostess, doing her part of fusion; "Mr. Oldcastle was out with the Yeomanry, and he has been telling us of the splendid reception he and his men——"

"Oh, not I. I didn't get back in time for it," struck in Tony, eagerly. "They had to leave me behind; and I was jolly well glad they did; for they do make such a fuss at home, when there's nothing to fuss about. I sneaked back quietly, after it was all over; only our own people——"

"Carried him shoulder high, and there were all sorts of fine doings," persisted Miss Kenyon, who had her own reasons for trumpeting, and secretly enjoyed her nephew's too obvious discomfiture.

Indeed, our poor Everest's face was foolishly long and frigid, for he was not versed in drawing-room wisdom, and knew not how to hide what he felt. "Was there not a great account in the paper and was it not sent up for her sisters' benefit by Kitty?" continued the speaker, who had read the account also.

"By Kitty? Oh, I say. Whatever did she do that for?" But though the interposing voice was deprecatory, it was a pleased voice.

"Why, but because she knew we should read it every word," said Beatrice, with the frank air of an old friend, "and we only wished we had been there, Tony."

"Did you? Did you really? But it was beastly rot, you know. I was only out nine months;"—the brisk young fellow turned to Everest and addressed him, taking it for granted that they two would view the matter in common. "And I didn't get in for much. Our fellows had more luck; but I didn't get out with the first draft, because the governor wouldn't let me cut Oxford short. I went up late, and he is awfully strict; but I got out in the end,"—triumphantly.

"And your lot did uncommonly well, I know," said Everest, speaking for the first time. It cost him an effort to say it, but he was a soldier and a gentleman. He sat down and tried to forget himself.

But the pleasure of the evening was gone for him; gone because of that easy figure with its smartness, its elegance, its air of flamboyant prosperity.

Do not be hard on Everest; recollect that he was a man no longer in his first youth; that he had early been forced to battle with the world and seen others outstrip him in the race; that disappointments keenly felt had been endured in the past, and faced him in the future; and that although in one respect his prospects had brightened as regarded his military career—and it was that which, after all, he cared about above all else in the world—there lurked a secret anxiety sufficient to harass and overshadow his spirits.

Tony Oldcastle looked as though he did not know what care meant; and in very truth the youngster was now on the top of the wave, which foamed in bubbling sunshine beneath his feet.

He proceeded to explain that he was now in high favour at home; even with the stern paterfamilias who

had refused permission for him to curtail prematurely his scholastic duties, but who had patted him on the back when he heard—oh, never mind what.

"We know," said Beatrice, archly; whereat Tony blushed and ran on.

Apparently he was flush of money, and eager to spend it. What were the things to do? What to see?

"I'm only just up, you know. And it was awfully good of you," this to the elder lady, with a pretty air of respect, "to let me look in to-night. Of course I might have called forever and not seen you; and I did not know how long they would be staying either,"—glancing at his friends the girls.

"They are not going back just yet," said Miss Kenyon, having come to this decision within the past five minutes. "My nephew is only just arrived in Town also; so now that we have two cavaliers——" she paused suggestively.

"I think," said Beatrice Maynard in her clear, well-modulated voice, "that is, I am afraid we must not make any more engagements; we are due at home next week."

As she spoke she fixed Gwen with her eye, and Gwen knew that it behoved her to be silent.

"If that is the case, we must make the most of such time as remains," rejoined Miss Kenyon. "To-morrow, what are we doing to-morrow?"

"We are going to Earl's Court with the Westons," said Beatrice, promptly.

"Ah! To be sure. We had thought of doing so, yes. Nothing was decided, I fancy. Nothing was said to them?"

"It is our only free night this week, cousin Augusta."
"Just so. Our only 'free' night. Let us keep it free

"Just so. Our only 'free' night. Let us keep it free and——"

"Won't you come and dine with me at the Carlton?" burst in Tony. "Miss Kenyon, won't you bring Beatrice

and Gwen and do that? I heard of the Carlton as the place to go to, from a fellow who knows; and I should be so awfully glad if you would."

The ladies looked at each other. To Everest's chagrin they looked indulgent and yielding. What could they see in that popinjay?

But the popinjay turned to himself. "And you will come too, won't you? I hope you don't think it presuming; but it would be so jolly, and I'll go to-night and secure a table,"—breathlessly looking from one to the other.

"Thanks. I—I——" stammered poor Everest, ruefully. He felt an ungracious brute, an ill-mannered, surly dog-in-the-manger; but though he did not want to accept the invitation for himself, he could not endure the thought of the others going without him.

Had he met Tony Oldcastle under other circumstances, he would have been the first to acknowledge the charm of gorgeous youth which the lad wore like a halo round his brow—but somehow it fretted the older man now. He felt so old, so poor, so dull and uninteresting beside that radiant Fortunatus.

He, too, would have liked to play the magnificent, and order dinner at the Carlton, or elsewhere, and sweep a whole party into his net at the word of command;—but the idea had not occurred to him, and never would have occurred to him. He was not accustomed to live on such a scale, and a sharp twinge of jealousy made itself felt.

Tony however was looking at Major Everest with some anxiety. Was he too much of a swell to dine with an unknown individual at a place like the Carlton, where one was seen by everybody? Was that the meaning of his hesitation, while the others were ready with their acceptance?

How little did the innocent lad guess of the truth. Even Everest's final "Most happy, I'm sure," somewhat hurriedly uttered, did not enlighten him, and he struggled to propitiate his big friend.

His big friend? In his heart, which was now rejoicing, he heard himself saying to one and another presently, "My friend Major Everest, Everest of the ——shire, who was dining with me at the Carlton the other night";—and such possibilities were worth fighting for.

"Do you remember that jolly evening we had at the Curles'?" said he, shyly.

At the Curles' Everest had been the hero of the hour, and Tony Oldcastle only a noisy boy who fought and wrangled with Kitty Maynard throughout dinner, and could not prevail on any one else to take notice of him. Perhaps the recollection might soften Everest's frigidity now.

If it did not, it did something else—it discomposed the entire group. Everybody began to speak at once, everybody seemed to have something to say about the Curles all in a moment, though their names had not once been mentioned before.

"We had a call from Mrs. Curle yesterday;" Miss Kenyon's voice rose above the rest. "A lively little person, who produced a still more lively big person. It says something for our constitutions that we were alive after they left. Houston, you must pay your respects in that quarter. Brown's Hotel. And be sure you are civil to Miss Connie Gibbs. She is a Californian heiress; and will tell you all about herself and her papa before you have been five minutes in her company."

"Oughtn't I to call too?" cried Tony, eagerly. "I didn't know the Curles were up. Willie Curle hunts with us, you know; and though they live some way off, and we don't see them often——"

"By all means call, Tony," said Beatrice, playfully.

"And you, you know them very well indeed," added

she, turning to Everest. "They will be delighted to welcome you back; but perhaps you have seen them already? Daisy Curle is looking so well and pretty; she says it is the country life she leads."

"I daresay," responded he, vaguely. He felt confused and irritated. Although Miss Maynard spoke in accents altogether devoid of significance, and though she looked him easily in the face while doing so, he could not meet her on equal grounds. He could not forget, or affect to forget so successfully.

"Brown's Hotel is in Dover Street," proceeded she, for his further guidance. Tony Oldcastle, however, alone registered the address in his note-book.

At length Tony rose to go, and no sooner had the door shut behind him than there was an outburst of acclamation. Was he not wonderful? Was he not delightful? Was ever any one so altered and improved? It took all Miss Kenyon's powers of self-control to prevent her showing that she as well as the Maynards had known the butterfly in its chrysalis state, and was as competent as they to compare and comment.

She had to allow herself to be told this and that; to hear that at one time the young heir of the Oldcastles was a rather terrible, long-legged creature who had outgrown his strength, and had had to stop at home and be fed up when he should have gone to the University; also that only his mother's entreaties and the doctor's dictum had prevailed to effect this, despite the fact that poor Tony was over six foot high and as thin as a whipping-post. "But he does not look a bit too tall now," appended Gwen, with animation.

"Too tall? His figure is perfect," cried cousin Augusta. (I fear Everest muttered something beneath his breath at this.) "And that smart, well set-up air! No awkwardness, no self-consciousness. I have never seen a more

charming young man. He looks as if all the world petted him, and yet he remains unspoilt."

The sisters took up the chorus. Tony was certainly marvellous. They had always liked Tony, even though he and Kitty could never see each other but to bite and scratch—(this from Gwen with a laugh). But no one could have supposed he would turn into such a——

"A nosegay," said her cousin, promptly. Miss Kenyon stole a glance at her nephew as she spoke, and he understood that he was appealed to.

"Yes, he seems a nice fellow," said he, indifferently.

"Major Everest despises our enthusiasm," said Beatrice, half to him half to the others. "But then he does not know what it is to live in a very quiet country neighbourhood, where people grow up alongside of each other, and know every single thing about each other from the cradle to the grave. Tony Oldcastle used to come over to nursery tea with us, and bring his 'Feeder' with him. And he and Kitty had to be separated, because they would throw their crusts at each other across the table. Once they had a battle royal; and Tony was shut up in the store cupboard till it was time for him to be fetched home, when he came out with his face smeared all over with raspberry jam."

"And, oh, Beatrice, do you remember the first day he wore Etons, and how we all tried on the collar?" laughed Gwen. "And poor Tony kept imploring us not to crush it, with tears in his eyes. He used to be in mortal terror of us three girls."

"And now adores you. So the world wags," said Miss Kenyon, cheerfully. "You, Houston, know nothing of such tender reminiscences; you were a poor little lonely fellow ——" she paused; it struck her that, though no longer "Little," it was a poor lonely fellow she was speaking to now.

She would have turned the subject, but Beatrice was unsparing. "Yes, people lose a great deal who have no childhood's friends," observed she, carelessly. "They are so very much more to one than any later friends can be. One makes mistakes in people whom one meets readymade; they don't show themselves as they really are; we accept them at their own valuation—we can't help it, we have nothing else to go by; and then when we discover it is all an illusion—"

"Beatrice, what are you talking about?"

But though Gwen exclaimed thus, Everest knew, as every one present knew, what was in the speaker's mind.

"What possessed you to be high and mighty to that poor man to-night?" demanded Gwen afterwards, the sisters having retired for the night.

"Why 'Poor'?" demanded Beatrice, quickly.

"Your last tirade wasn't over polite to him, at any rate; and there was nothing to call it forth. I am sure he is humble enough. He sat by when we were all admiring Tony, and smiled benignly. Why you should have broken out—"

"I was not thinking of Major Everest at all."

"Then you might have been. It could not have been very pleasant for him; and he is so inoffensive——"

"Pooh!" said Beatrice.

She was very well pleased with herself; she was not in the least taken in as Gwen was by Everest's studied smile; she saw that he neither liked nor joined in the praises of Tony Oldcastle—but that was nothing, that was a mere peg to hang the rest upon; what she meant Everest to understand, he understood well enough; and now he might go and come, re-attach himself to his friends the Curles if he chose, and be very sure that he was one of the "Ready-made" people who could never be as interesting in Miss Maynard's eyes as the playmates of her childhood.

Perhaps he had also discovered that she was thinking of Daisy, and that her intimacy with the latter had been premature. If so, this was better still. There would be no complications in the future.

She had set herself to forget the past, all but its lesson, that bitter, humbling lesson; and could she but be certain that never again so long as she lived would she throw herself at the head of man or woman, she would try not to mind the cruel fact that she had once done so.

"I suppose, I needed something of that sort," she reflected, mournfully. "But I will rise above it," she resolved, proudly.

And it was certainly easier to rise above it now than it would once have been; easier in London than at Maynard Towers. Her present life was so varied, so exhilarating; her present companions so soothing; and she had so absolutely done with the past that, although the re-appearance of both Everest and the Curles was a trifling upsetting for the moment, it was satisfactory to find that the annoyance was merely on the surface. She did not sleep very well that night, but the night was hot, and Gwen was also restless and wished to talk.

"Why are you so determined to go back next week?" said she. "You looked such daggers at me that I could say nothing; but if cousin Augusta presses us to stay, I can't see why we should not?"

"She won't press us; she wants to take her nephew into the house."

"Well, there is room enough. We don't keep him out."

"Our being here does. It would look odd."

"Who to? Who is to know? People are not all watching and staring as they do at home. And it would be rather nice to have a man to go about with. It isn't as if we were flirting girls; we would let him alone and

he would let us alone. I can't think why cousin Augusta shouldn't invite him at once."

"You mean that there would be no danger for him, any more than for us?" said Beatrice, trying to speak lightly, but listening intently for the answer. She sometimes wondered whether Gwen had really been as stupidly blind as appeared.

Gwen smiled to herself. Poor Beatrice. But Beatrice had got over it long ago, and they had told each other to take no notice, and even Kitty had been careful, so that her present remark appeared to her the acme of tact and artfulness. "She must think me an idiot," argued she, philosophically, "but that's nothing, if it makes her more comfortable. It was quite a hit to suggest he might come into the house;"—all of which took but an instant to flash through her mind, and her response was ready directly it was required.

"Oh, danger? That sort of danger doesn't come off twice. People who like each other, and are very friendly and all that on first meeting, don't catch fire and flame up afterwards. It is like being vaccinated to prevent smallpox."

"Gwen."

Gwen pricked up her ears, and half turned her head.

"I—I wasn't vaccinated," said poor Beatrice in a low voice, while a little attempt at a laugh choked in her throat. "I—I did care a little for Major Everest. Oh, it wasn't much; at least it was soon over, and I was so glad no one knew, or thought about it. It was not his fault——"

"Oh, Beatrice, it was."

"Was?" said Beatrice, surprised. "Surely you didn't—surely nobody—oh, don't say," her voice becoming sharp with distress, "that you all made the same mistake I did, and saw that I did? Oh, Gwen, that would be dreadful—"

"Hush, don't be excited. I can't think, when you flurry me; and now that you have told me——"

"But I did not mean to tell, only somehow it slipped out. I have kept it to myself for so long, and I did want a little—a little sympathy."

"Sometimes I would have given anything to speak to you," continued Beatrice, going on rapidly now that she had begun, "for though we don't always think the same about things, you are always kind, Gwen; and it seemed a shame—but I simply couldn't. I could not bring out the words. If you had seemed to guess——" she paused.

"But I did. Only you would not have liked me to say anything."

"But if it had been said without my liking, and if you had not minded my being angry at the time, the relief it would have been! Gwen, did the others then——?" the tremulous wistfulness of her tone was infinitely touching.

"Just you lie still and I'll tell you all about it," quoth Gwen, "only wait till I get a glass of water first, for I am so thirsty,"—and she rose and crossed the room; she was not sorry to have a few minutes in which to collect her thoughts. "Now," proceeded she, sitting down on the edge of the bed, "now I'll cool myself, and tell you quietly, and don't interrupt. Major Everest does admire you; he did from the first; and we thought, we all thought it was a case. Daisy was as jealous as she could be, and did all she could to keep him out of the way; especially after that day they came to luncheon, and you and he went off together into the library. You should have seen how she kept trying to go after you; and it was Miss Adam who kept her back. Miss Adam saw it all as plainly as we did; and she was quite wonderful in the way she managed to appear unconscious, and yet to do just the right thing. After that we thought, of course, that he would begin regularly

to come about, and—and do as they all do. And Mr. Curle's accident seemed so lucky, for it kept him there, and was an excuse for your going there——"

"I didn't go often; I am sure I didn't."

"Not very often, but there was always something to do for the poor invalid, or to send him,"—slyly.

"Oh, Gwen, I never thought, I never dreamed—oh, I wish I hadn't."

"Don't groan; there is nothing to groan about. You were all right; you behaved as properly as possible; and even mother saw nothing to object to; it was only after that walk you took together——"

"It was quite accidental, it was indeed."

"Was it? I always wanted to know. But if it had not been, there was no harm, only mother—you know how she takes things—and I don't suppose she really meant to be unkind; but I did think it a little hard on you to be stopped going to The Hollies that evening. And I told Major Everest——" she paused.

"What?" said Beatrice, eagerly. "What?"

"No, I didn't," said Gwen, re-considering. "I meant to tell him; but I remember now that I did not get the chance. You do fluster me, Beatrice; and I only want to tell the truth. I made up my mind to say to him something to show that it was not your doing your staying away——"

"And you didn't? I am so glad you didn't."

"So am I now. For it really was true that he was quite gay and festive in spite of your not being there, and I was rather provoked with him; and then when we came home, there were you quite gay and festive too, and I was just as provoked with you; and after that evening it all seemed to die away. There! I don't think there is anything more to say. We all felt disappointed; because he really is a nice man, and you are so difficult to please—"

"Difficult? I am far, far too easy."

"You are easy and difficult at the same time. You like very few people as they are, but if you make them up as you wish them to be in your own mind, you like them terrifically."

"You are thinking of Daisy Curle?" said Beatrice, quietly.

"Yes, of course. She isn't the least the person you once supposed her."

"I know it. And probably Major Everest is not any more like the Major Everest I took him for."

"No; but he is harmless, which Daisy is not. However, don't let us begin on Daisy, we know all about her" —("That you don't," thought Beatrice, but her lips were sealed on this subject)—"and there's only one thing about her in the least interesting," continued Gwen, "do you think that she had any hand in—in turning him from you?"

"No; for he never was turned, as you call it, towards me. It was for another reason he sought me out. Gwen, dear, I can't tell you about this, for though I do not remember if I was exactly made to promise not, yet I know that it was understood. He, Major Everest, had something on his mind; some one he cared about was, or might be, in a trying position——"

"Daisy Curle," quoth Gwen, briskly.

Beatrice considered a moment.

"I must not tell you whether it was Daisy Curle or not," she said, "but you may think so if you choose. There is no harm if you do. There was no harm in the whole thing. I was to stand by her if things went wrong, which they never have done, nor may do. If they do, it is but a little blow to her vanity—oh, Gwen, I am so ashamed to say it, but the real truth is that if he had told me of anything bad, wrong, wicked, it

would not have made me feel so unutterably small as did this fuss about a trifling, tiresome—I can't explain, but it was such bathos, and I to have to take a solemn part in it!"

"It was too bad. You who are always so dignified!"

"There was very little dignity left in me after that odious walk. The worst of it was that I had been fool enough to——"

"Well?"

"To expect something different," said Beatrice, gulping down a rising in her throat. "And he did—there was—some excuse—for it. We met in the village; I was coming out of the post-office, when he saw me and uttered an exclamation and seized my hand—not like a man who only chances upon you in an ordinary way. Then he began at once as if he had not a minute to lose, about something he wished to say, and could he say it alone? And his tone was so——"

"Oh, Beatrice!"

"What could I think? I hardly thought at all. I just felt myself hurried along; and it was all I could do to pretend to listen, and keep a decently composed face; and then all at once we were in the little wood, and he began to talk about Daisy Curle—oh!"

"I knew it was she. Never mind."

"It was like a horrid dream. I kept thinking: What has Daisy Curle to do with us? Why are you putting off the real thing? My brain went round and round; and at first I could not believe, I simply could not believe, that that was all!" A sudden sob, and the disappearance of a brown head beneath the bed-clothes.

Presently there issued a muffled voice. "Oh, Gwen, I felt so wounded, so hurt. He went talking on and on—and my one comfort is that I feel sure he had not the slightest idea of what I was feeling—and oh, he must

be dense," she tried to laugh, " for I am no good at acting a part——"

"But you are good, Beatrice. We all say so. I have seen you take in mother, and she believe you to be all that is grand and indifferent, when Kitty and I knew that every word she said was stinging you. Mother has a way——"

"Dear Gwen, don't say that now. Perhaps if we could see into her heart, she is feeling sad and sore too. I have come to see that lately. Mother does not understand girls; she has not kept up with them; and I do not believe she was ever exactly a girl, not what we call a girl, herself. So we and others like us are enigmas to her——"

"I daresay, but let us talk of Major Everest."

"No. Don't let us talk of him. His day is over. It was a foolish fancy on my part; and I should have got over it sooner, if we had lived anywhere else, or gone about more. I saw that to-night. I really did not mind his coming here in the least; and now he may come and go as much as he pleases, it is nothing to me."

"Good-night, then," said Gwen, softly, and she leaned across and kissed her sister's cheek. "You are not going to lie awake thinking of him?" added she, after a moment's pause.

"Oh, dear, no; I am quite sleepy now."

"Are you?" pondered Gwen.

CHAPTER IX.

"THE OLDCASTLES WILL FOLLOW THE MAYNARDS, BEATRICE."

"GET rid of her," said Mr. Curle, succinctly.

He had been seized upon, and dragged by the coatcollar into his wife's room, there to hear her woes and grievances; for, however Daisy might choose to paddle her own canoe among smooth waters, directly there were breakers ahead, she turned to her Willie to pilot her out of them.

"But I can't," rejoined she to the above, with piteous intonation. "How can I? It was just the same at school; whatever Connie chose to do, she would do it, and make the rest of us do it. She could be a perfect tyrant. You have no idea what a will she has."

"Times are changed, my lass. You have no need to put your neck under Connie's or anybody's yoke. I thought she was your friend; and you seemed glad to meet, and made so much of each other that——"

"I know, I know. And of course I was glad at first. Connie is good fun, and I thought it would be nice going about with her; and she has heaps of money, so that it would have been no expense to you——"

"As to that, I don't grudge it," said he; "if she had been as poor as a church mouse she might have hung on to us and welcome, if it pleased you; but if she is going to try for the upper hand——" and he laughed significantly.

"That is just what she does; and oh, Willie, she

means to get it. She knows I dare not break with her. When she insisted on being taken to call on the Maynard girls, she did not really care about knowing them, it was only because she saw that it annoyed me, and that I tried to put her off the idea."

"But why did you try? Connie's all right; smartlooking girl, dresses tip-top, and can talk against time with any one."

"And tell them all about her 'Papa' and his 'Pile,' and what he does for her, and what allowance she gets from him, during the first five minutes! Willie, can't you see what Beatrice and Gwen Maynard must think of that style of conversation? Try not to be stupid, Willie. Connie Gibbs like anybody you ever met in Somersetshire, or that the Maynards ever meet anywhere?"

"The Maynards, hey? So you put yourself on a level with the Maynards?" He regarded her with an amused look.

"Why not?" retorted she, briskly. "Never mind what I was; what I am now is the point. You cannot deny that we visit and are visited by all the county people in our own neighbourhood, and that it was principally owing to the Maynards that this came about."

"And through my subscription to the hunt, and other subscriptions."

"They helped; but if Lady Laura Maynard had kept us at a distance, your subscriptions would have needed to be doubled,-and even then they might not have got me into people's houses. And it was Beatrice who did still more for me than her mother. I worked Beatrice for all she was worth. I don't really care so very much for her society."

"Seems to me you don't care so very much for any one's society," commented he, somewhat dryly.

"I am not a woman's woman. But I don't mind.

Connie Gibbs when I am by myself; she does not bore me as Beatrice Maynard does; only now that we have fallen in with the Fitzhuberts——"

"Aye, I thought it was that. Poor Connie must go to the wall."

"She won't go. I tell you she won't."

"What's to be done then?" He yawned, stretched himself in the depths of an easy chair, and locked his hands across his waistcoat.

"That is just what I want you to tell me," said Daisy, impatiently. Beneath his sluggish exterior, she held that her husband possessed a lump of stolid common sense at which she could always nibble.

"Here are the Fitzhuberts, who never saw us but in quite the best of what there was—— I mean society, of course," continued she; "and they are quite ready to be civil now that we have run across them again; so that it does seem hard luck we should be hampered with a girl from the backwoods. Of course Vi Fitzhubert will think twice before she asks us to anything, if it entails our bringing Connie—indeed I don't suppose she will ask us at all."

"That needn't break our hearts," quoth Willie, twisting his watch chain. He had no social ambition.

"Oh, you stupid. But you never did see an inch before your nose, Willie. You think London is made up of theatres, and polo matches, and things you can pay to see. I want Vi Fitzhubert to take me about with her. I would provide the carriage, and all that—the Fitzhuberts have simply nothing to live upon, as they themselves told us, you remember; and they were glad enough to let us run them at Monte Carlo—but how can I do anything here, with Connie insisting on going wherever we go? And she will. She as good as told me just now that she was not going to be left out in the cold."

- "Bully for her! She showed her pluck to say it."
- "Pluck! Willie, you are. Pluck? She liked saying it. You should have seen her face as she said it. And to-night when we might have so enjoyed ourselves—"
- "Oh, come, we can enjoy ourselves as it is. You can show off your fine friends, and I can order a rattling good dinner for them. They can't be squeamish as to their company if they are willing to put up with Connie Gibbs—not that I see anything to object to in Connie—but if they do, and are willing to lump it for the sake of a dinner at the Carlton, they can't be so nasty particular; now, can they? I don't suppose they look on the Carlton as an A I place, mind you; not as a place where they would know every second person in the room; it's not like a club; still it's a——"
 - "How did you learn all this?" cried Daisy, amazed.
- "Heard two fellows talking. Spotted them for ultra swells, and listened, thinking I might pick up a thing or two."
 - "And did they say the Carlton was not---?"
- "Oh, they said it was good enough; quite good enough for most people,—but it was a place where you might rub shoulders with your butcher or baker. Thought I, or your brewer—meaning yours truly, William Curle."
 - "I wonder?" mused Daisy, considering.
- "You need not be put off by that, you know. I tell you they were ultra swells, and had no end of airs. Besides, one said that although he would not invite his friends to dine there, he had done it himself the other night."
 - "But he wouldn't invite his friends?"
- "They may have been dukes," said Willie, eyeing her.

 "He may have been a duke himself. Anyway, I don't see that it need matter for us. For my part, when I heard you invite Lord and Lady Fitzhubert to dine at the

Carlton on the spur of the moment, and without so much as knowing they were in the hotel before you met 'em on the stairs—'pon my word, I was proud of you, little woman."

Further than that, no assistance was to be had from Daisy's chief adherent on the present occasion.

He was ready to follow her lead and do as he was bid with alacrity; but since his rough-and-ready method of dealing with the lady who was now felt to be an incubus met with no approval, he could suggest no other.

Daisy was quite certain that she could not afford to have a rupture with Connie Gibbs; and, that being the case, she had better keep to the sunny side of her. It would be worse than useless, he argued, to sulk and give in; she must either pick a quarrel with her friend and part company for good and all, or maintain a smiling face and feign to find nothing amiss.

"Don't let her see that you are under her thumb, if under her thumb you have got to be," was his parting admonition; "once she sees that, you are done for." And he drew himself slowly up out of the easy chair.

Still, Daisy thought she would effect an escape somehow. The advent of the Fitzhuberts was of great importance—might have been and might yet be of the most delightful importance to her—and she could not see all the advantages to be obtained from it thrown away without a struggle. Left to herself, she drew up a plan of action which she considered more subtle, more delicate, and more likely to be ultimately successful than that recommended by her husband, and this was to throw the onus of any misdemeanours, such as her intimacy with Lady Fitzhubert might give rise to, on the latter's shoulders.

("Dear Connie, you and I are such small people—no, I couldn't say 'Small,'" reflected she, re-constructing an

imaginary apology. "She would think I meant to laugh at her. Let me see. Of course I must say 'You and I,' so as to put us on the same footing. I should have to be desperately affectionate and meek; and if I could get her to think I was only flattered and all that by the Fitzhuberts, and would come back to her as soon as they were off the field, she might be kept quiet for the time being. Willie could take her off with him somewhere. I could get him to propose something before she knew I had anything else in view"—and she planned and plotted till the future seemed more clear.)

By the time she had dressed to go out, and descended to the sitting-room where Miss Gibbs awaited her, also fully equipped for the afternoon's round, she was able to recall the advice above received, and admire her friend's fresh and wonderful toilette with all her wonted volubility.

"Glad you like it," said Miss Connie, with a smile. But there was a hard gleam in her eye as she inquired presently at what hour they dined, and if the tickets which had been taken for the play that evening had been sent back?

"Because it was all very fine to say we had no engagement," observed she, shaking out her parasol with a little vicious snap, as she seated herself in the open carriage, "but I don't see for my part why we couldn't have gone to the theatre first and asked your friends to a supper afterwards. To spend a whole evening on a single dinner is poor fun anyway."

A retort was on Daisy's lips, but she refrained. If she could only have now picked the quarrel advocated by downright Willie, how she would have loved to do so! She had all the instincts of the class from which she sprang; and to have let loose her tongue at this insolent girl, who took her favours and repaid them with a beggar's whine at their being inadequate, would have given her such keen gratification that she scarce knew how to be silent.

Silent however she was, with much inward self-gratulation; and presently her companion's humour improved, and the afternoon passed equably.

"Now, we must be very smart to-night, Connie," exhorted she, on separating to dress, "and mind you are ready in time, dear; for Willie says that, as hosts, we must be there before the Fitzhuberts, whatever happens. The Fitzhuberts will very likely be late, but we must be punctual."

"Oh, I'll be on time," responded Connie.

"She would as soon I had a breakdown by the way, however," reflected she; "if Mrs. William Curle could get rid of Miss Constantia Gibbs for the next three or four hours she would be mightily pleased,—but no, you don't, Daisy, not if I know it,"—and Miss Constantia Gibbs smiled to herself in the glass.

Overhead, very much overhead, in one of the topmost rooms of the hotel in fact, another lady was also smiling at the moment, and Lady Fitzhubert's smile by an odd coincidence related to the same person as did that of Daisy Curle's other bosom friend.

"Oh, I don't call it at all unfortunate," cried she, gaily, in answer to a remark which had just been passed. "We had nowhere to go to-night; we shan't see a soul we know; and we may as well be dined by those oddities as not."

"You had better take care what you do. You can't just eat their dinner and be off."

"Why not? Every one knows that if you have a box lent you for the opera, it would be idiotic to waste it."

"You will have to take them on with you."

"Nonsense. How can you suggest such a thing?"—sharply.

"I say you'll have to do it," persisted Lord Fitzhubert, "you can't be so beastly rude—at least you can, trust you for that," with a short, harsh laugh, "but I haven't your nerve; and I won't go, I tell you straight, I won't go to dine with those people, unless you offer to take them on with you afterwards."

He set his lips obstinately; and Vi Fitzhubert, who minded no other living being, knew that she would have to give in to her husband. She flung the chain from her neck on to the dressing-table.

"George, you are too ridiculous. As if I don't understand these matters better than you. I tell you the Curles are quite sufficiently honoured by our company at dinner——"

"It shan't be my company unless you promise to invite them to your box afterwards."

"And crowd it with a party of vulgar-looking nobodies, whom people would stare at and wonder where on earth they sprang from? And the Montanverts would hear of it afterwards, and be furious. They would attack me—George, I wonder how you can be so unkind? I would almost sooner not go at all."

"Don't go then. You have heard 'Faust' often enough. It is no great catch to have a box for it."

"It is a 'Catch,' as you call it. A box on the grand tier is always a 'Catch' for whatever opera it is—and to get the loan of it on our first night was wonderful. But if you are going to spoil it all——" and tears of disappointment did actually stand in Lady Fitzhubert's well-known beautiful eyes.

"Can't help that," said he, unmoved. "I am tolerably hardened to accepting civilities which I don't pay back, but when I can, and that without spending a penny—how

can you be such a fool, Vi? Here is your chance for knocking off a whole list of arrears—and when I think of how you let Daisy Curle finance you——"

"Never mind, never mind. She liked it."

"And if you could be seen with her at Homburg and Monte Carlo—seen every day and all day long—why make a fuss about one night here in London, where it is ten to one that no one takes the slightest notice?"

"It is not Daisy so much——" murmured she, reluctantly.

"Fat Willie can stand in the background," resumed her husband, perceiving he had made an impression; "I'll stand with him, and he need never be seen at all."

"Could we do that?" Lady Fitzhubert glanced at the speaker, and affected to ruminate over the idea. "Grand tier boxes are large, you know; and four people——"

"I'll manage it. Curle will be glad enough to stand behind—or sit behind—if I do. He will be more at his ease than if he has to listen and never stir."

"You are wrong, he is musical; don't you remember how he hung upon Daisy's lips when she sang?"

"Oh, ah, yes; yes, to be sure. The opera will be the very thing for him, then; and it will look handsome our recollecting his tastes. But he can hear as well in the back of the box as in the front; so I promise you he shan't be in view if he goes."

"George, will you promise something else? If I, to oblige you"—George grinned—"to oblige you," repeated his wife, emphatically, "invite the Curles to go with us to-night, will you solemnly promise that you will not force me to invite any one else? You may be right, perhaps you are about our taking this opportunity to pay off old scores with the Curles——"

"Hullo, I didn't say that. It won't quite do that."

"Do let me finish. It would do a great deal. Daisy

at least will know how to value it; but will you now give me your word of honour-your word of honour, George—that you will be content with—with—"

"With your being hand-in-glove with them to-night, and cutting them dead in the street to-morrow?"

"No, no. I wasn't thinking of that. Oh no, that would not be required. All I meant was that you would be satisfied with my inviting the Curles, husband and wife, and no one else to the box?" And again she threw a quick glance of inquiry, which might have put him on his guard, but did not.

Obviously Lord Fitzhubert had not, so to speak, taken in Miss Connie Gibbs.

She was present when the meeting between the friends took place; but although he had subsequently remarked upon the young lady's height, and the odd contrast she and Mrs. Curle made to each other, he had received no impression beyond the momentary one: he had not seen that she belonged permanently to the Curles' party.

Accordingly, he now gave the required promise readily enough, and the matter being settled, he was ordered off, and the bell rung for his wife's maid.

"Done, as I'm a Dutchman!" mentally ejaculated he. an hour later in the hall of the Carlton.

The whole place was in a hum with arrivals and introductions; and young Tony Oldcastle, looking round with the keenest sensations of pleasure and gratification, stood in a prominent position awaiting his guests,for, as luck would have it, he had hit upon the same night for entertaining the Maynard party and Major Everest, that his other Somersetshire neighbours had for inviting Lord and Lady Fitzhubert.

In the hubbub of the hall he did not, however, perceive this.

During the brief interval which had elapsed since

securing his principal guests, he had provided others to meet them, and Mr. and Mrs. Wilde and their daughter Clara, with whom the Maynards were as intimate as with the Oldcastles, were to be also recipients of the boy's frank hospitality. Further, there was a bachelor neighbour known to both families, whose company was equally likely to be agreeable to them.

"We shall be nine in all," reflected Tony with pride; and he had secured one of the largest tables in the dining-room to meet the case.

Naturally he was absorbed in fulfilling the duties of his onerous position, and had neither eyes nor ears for anything else; so that it was not till all were seated, and he had apologised for the odd number, and for two ladies having to sit together—(and found that Gwen Maynard and Clara Wilde were delighted to be the two, and had heaps and heaps to say to each other, especially about some event in which they had mutually taken part shortly before)—that he could breathe and look about him.

What he then saw made him start, and, but that he was lifted above all minor considerations, would possibly have made him swear.

The Curles! The Curles at the next table! The Curles whom he knew very well and liked very well down in the depths of the country, where the feeling was that Mr. and Mrs. William Curle were such useful people that any little civility towards them was well worth showing—so that the young men at the various houses were encouraged to call at The Hollies, and dine at The Hollies, and prance round Mrs. Curle's phaeton at the meets—the Curles upon whom, indeed, he had meant to call, but whom he would reserve for Somersetshire, to be taken up where they had been left behind in rurality and jog-trottery—the Curles to turn up at this gay and glorious moment! It was—dash it—it was a nuisance.

That was to say, it might be a nuisance, supposing it bothered his party, and made them fancy they had come to the wrong place?

Of course the Curles—somehow he had never thought of the Curles as doing anything like this.

"Tony," said Beatrice Maynard, leaning forward to address her host.

Mrs. Wilde and Miss Kenyon were properly relegated to his right and left, but at a round table it is easy to talk to any one.

"Do you see who is near you?" continued Miss Maynard, directing Tony's eye with her own. "Is not that one of the unlikely things that are always happening?"—and she looked smilingly significant.

"Dear me! Mr. and Mrs. Curle!" said Tony, with innocent surprise. ("But though you did see them, you might as well have let us get on a bit first, you Beatrice," muttered he, to himself.)

He was abjectly afraid of Beatrice however, with the awe of childish days still upon him; so that whatever his private feelings might be, he looked to her with anxious eyes to guide him in this strait.

As she was smiling, nodding, and waving her fingers—so must he nod and smile; nay, he must do more, for old-fashioned politeness dictated a hasty rising from his chair, with "Excuse me" to his own ladies, and as much warmth as he could throw into his manner of greeting neighbours whom he had not seen since his return to England.

He was not gone two minutes, and returned to his seat, having acquitted himself bravely.

The Wildes and Mr. Bywater having also exchanged greetings with their Somerset neighbours, it now remained for Everest to do his part. He was the last to perceive what was going on, but "The Curles, the Curles,"

now passing round the table in undertones, at length enlightened him, and he turned his head.

"What, you?" exclaimed Mr. Curle, who was perhaps the only person of those concerned who was neither surprised, nor annoyed, nor anything but genuinely gratified by the encounter,—"My dear Everest!"—and the honest fellow beamed all over.

But the place and time did not admit of more at the moment, and Everest, who had risen hastily, re-seated himself as his host had done. As he did so, he could not resist looking at two people, his aunt and Beatrice Maynard—but only one of the two was looking at him. Beatrice was talking steadily to Mrs. Wilde.

"That will do the trick," reflected Lady Fitzhubert, who had an alert mind. "The very thing. She can leave her backwoods girl with those people; and as she evidently knows the whole lot, they can't refuse."

"Oh, certainly," said Daisy, when the above was explained to her. "Oh dear, yes. Of course I can ask Beatrice Maynard. I can ask her anything. I know her so very well. I know them all. The old man is our M.F.H.—we think a great deal of our M.F.H. in Somersetshire—and that is his wife and daughter. And of course the Maynards and Tony Oldcastle will do anything for me, and it is his party——"

"Just ask him then. Ask him if Miss—I forget her name—can join them, as we can't take her on with us?" said Lady Fitzhubert, perfectly aware that she was doing an impossible thing, but equally resolved to do it. "You have not said anything to her about the opera, have you?"—the arrangement having been made in camera, even Willie knowing nothing of it.

Lady Fitzhubert was now drawing on her gloves, and the time for action had arrived. "Not a word," whispered Daisy, back.

She was excited and elated in the highest degree. Only her fear of Connie Gibbs had prevented her talking of the opera all through dinner.

And now if Connie would only be content, and see things as they ought to be seen? She really thought Connie would. The party at the next table was gay and attractive. It had an air of distinction too. Even Vi Fitzhubert, in her very latest decollete dress, and undeniably the smartest woman in the room, could not make the calm, well-bred ladies at the other table look inferior; even she could not look down upon them. They were not of her world, but—"Do be quick," said the latter, imperiously, "we shall be late as it is".

"Late? For what?" demanded Willie Curle, overhearing this. "You are not going to leave us, Lady Fitzhubert?" He had just ordered some fresh claret of a rare vintage.

"She is going to take us on with her," interposed Daisy, eagerly. "Isn't it kind, Willie? To the opera. To 'Faust'. And it is so long since we heard 'Faust'——"

"To the opera now!" cried Willie, amazed. "At this time of night!"

"Only a little after nine," said Lord Fitzhubert, carelessly. "My wife never goes sooner. I never heard the beginning of an opera in my life. Hope you'll come? We shall get there in ten minutes,"—and he rose from his chair.

"Where are we going?" inquired Miss Connie Gibbs, and at the "We" the other four glanced at each other.

"Connie, dear," began Daisy Curle, and rustled round to her friend's side.

"That girl looks sulky," reflected Violet Fitzhubert, with a sense of amused enjoyment which repaid her for having sat at the same table with Connie hitherto. Daisy was whispering breathlessly, and apparently with success.

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"Of course I shall be delighted," said Miss Gibbs, aloud. But as she spoke she cast a look upon Daisy Curle the expression of which was peculiar.

Daisy, however, saw nothing, and now it was over Beatrice Maynard's chair she hung. "But this is not my party," objected Beatrice, startled; "it is not me whom you should ask——"

"What is it, Mrs. Curle?" cried Tony, seeing that towards him the eyes of both were directed; and then, no one knew exactly how the next move was effected, but all in a moment, the Fitzhuberts with their satellites had vanished from the scene, and a strange and most unwelcome addition had been made to the other party. Literally Miss Connie Gibbs had been flung into their midst.

Connie was very meek, and wonderfully silent. No one would have guessed the rage that boiled within her breast. She to be treated so? She, who had hugged to herself the conviction that no one yet had ever got the better of Constantia Gibbs, and to whom Daisy Curle's futile little efforts for freedom were as so many cobwebs to be brushed aside? Daisy to turn the tables?

"Well, I had about done with her anyway," reflected her tyrant. "So now, Miss Peggy Vickers that was, guess you'll be rather sorry you didn't take me with you to the opera to-night. Anyhow you'd better have sent me home to bed, than left me to entertain this fine party of your friends;"—and from beneath her lowered eyelids she furtively scanned their several aspects.

"They don't cotton to me," whispered she, to herself.

"Poor girl, it isn't her fault," murmured Beatrice to Gwen, as the party rose to go into another room; and she walked with Connie, and continued the conversation after all had re-arranged themselves in a small private apartment.

"You all know each other, don't you?" said Miss Gibbs, nodding round. "And you all come from the same part of the world? How nice!——" and she laughed a silly, meaningless laugh,—then suddenly stopped and listened with an abrupt transition of attention to what was passing between two other speakers.

The speakers were Major Everest and Tony Oldcastle. Everest was relating an anecdote—one of the many little anecdotes partly humorous, partly pathetic, to which the war had given rise—and Tony, while commenting and ejaculating, was also anxiously interposing an experience of his own.

"You know the fellow, Beatrice," he cried, turning to her, "Jem Crutch, of your village. He has had the most wonderful luck. Enlisted because he was no good at home, and turned out the smartest fellow in the regiment. And the regiment got most awfully hammered, you know; and Jem Crutch did something or other, and only just missed the V.C.; and he is safe to get his commission some time or other. I could hardly believe my eyes when I saw him, and that was several months ago; and none of us will know him when he comes back. And it was all owing to luck—of course he knew how to take hold of his luck—but it is only one man in a thousand who both gets the chance and makes the most of it."

"Or one woman in a thousand," said Miss Connie Gibbs in a deliberate, resonant voice.

Everybody without exception looked at the person who thus spoke. Her tone in a manner compelled them to look at her.

"I fancy I could tell a thing as queer as that," said she, running her eyes round the group. "Shall I?" addressing no one in particular, but all by inference. "It won't take long, and it is very interesting, and I can vouch for the truth of it. Well then," continued the speaker, taking the general silence for consent, "to begin at the beginning. Ten years ago I was sent over to France from California, my native place, to be educated; and one day there arrived at the convent school where I was, the queerest little beggar girl—not that she was a beggar, but she looked like one—and if she wasn't in rags, she had known what rags were, or I'm mistaken. Fancy, she was to learn alongside of us—of us, who could pay for the best of everything!—and we weren't over well pleased, you may believe. We set ourselves to work, and we found out every single thing about that girl; and that she was, as we thought, picked up from the streets. She was pretty, and she could sing, and a man had taken a fancy to her——"

("What is all this about? Are we obliged to listen?" murmured the decorous Mrs. Wilde to Miss Kenyon. "Does not sound quite—quite pleasant, does it?"

- "She is not to be stopped," said Miss Kenyon, quietly.)
- "The upshot was that at the end of three years you wouldn't have known that girl," proceeded the narrator, her shrill tones rising as she proceeded. "She turned out the cleverest, artfullest, little minx—there was nothing she didn't know, or couldn't learn;—and she married the man—"
- "Glad she did that, at least," breathed Mrs. Wilde, behind her fan.
- "And," the narrator paused with true dramatic instinct, gathering every eye as she proceeded—"and—she went out of the room with him just now!"
- "Suppose none of you guessed I was speaking of Daisy Curle?" drawled Miss Gibbs, relapsing into a confidential attitude. "It was what this gentleman here said about luck, that made me think of Daisy. If ever any one has had luck in this world, she has; and as for laying hold of it, as you say your friend did," addressing herself to

the bewildered Tony, who was staring at her open-mouthed, "Mrs. William Curle wouldn't be the woman she is if she didn't know how to do that with both hands. She has William under her thumb; she runs the show with his money wherever she goes; and down in your parts she takes you all in, don't she? You are all her friends, as I heard her just now tell those people she has gone off with——"

"We are her friends."

It was Beatrice Maynard who spoke. She had risen to her feet, and confronted the base informer with flashing eyes and a heaving bosom.

The rest of the party now fixed their attention upon Beatrice. Of what was passing within each breast it boots not here to inquire; suffice it to say that mingled amazement and consternation was the prevailing feeling, while Tony Oldcastle alone experienced a sense of vague exhilaration that such an *éclaircissement* should have taken place at *his* party, thus stamping it forever as a matter of history.

Beatrice, as we say, stood up to speak by an involuntary impulse. She scarcely knew what she was doing, but she knew what she meant to do, and that the time had come for her to fulfil her promise.

"You have told me, at least, no new thing," proceeded she, proud disdain curling her lips; "you meant to take us all by surprise, but this is no surprise—to me. I have known your story for a long time. I did not know it at first," she paused; "perhaps had I done so things might have been different, but that is no matter. I am Daisy Curle's friend, and you cannot turn me into her enemy."

"A strange friend for Miss Maynard!"

But Miss Maynard deigned no notice of the sneer. She was looking rapidly from one to another of the assembled group, as an orator scans his audience before a fresh effort. Could she move them? Could she win them?

Suddenly she leaned down, and laid her hand on that of the person whom she intuitively recognised as the one with whom her task would be most difficult. Mrs. Wilde was a formidable matron of a type sufficiently well known to need no description here.

"I have no right to speak to you," said Beatrice, humbly, "you who are so much wiser, so much better, so much more loved and respected and looked up to than I shall ever be-but I know that you will bear with me. May I ask you to listen for just a moment, and to remember that I am pleading for-for a friend? What has Daisy done? Is it her fault that she was not born as we were, guarded and sheltered and cared for as we have been in our early homes? Home? She had no home. You have heard how her childhood was passed, in earning her daily bread. What was wrong in that? She was taken from poverty and ignorance and given the education that comes to us by inheritance—given it as a favour, owing it to the affection of an honest man who wanted to fit her for becoming his wife—what was wrong in that? Is she to be blamed because she rose to his level-perhaps it is not a very high one, but it brought her among people——" she paused, her lip trembling.

"It brought her into contact with you, Beatrice,"—markedly.

"I know, I know," said she. "But the first advances were on my side, they were indeed. I sought out Daisy. I insisted on our being intimate. I took her as she was —I never asked nor thought of asking what she had been. Why should she have told me of her own accord? I see no reason why. Our lives are our own; our own and —God's." Suddenly the speaker's voice sank, and the last word fell away to a whisper.

"Certainly, Beatrice. Still, dear Beatrice—," the elder lady looked disturbed and dubious. ("The Maynards are responsible for this most unfortunate circumstance," thought she; "and unfortunate it is, however respectable the Curles may be. They are, in a manner, impostors.")

"If I thought she was really a good woman," murmured she.

"Is that for us to judge? Are we called upon—forgive my saying so—to determine of every one we admit to our acquaintanceship whether they are 'Good' according to our tenets, or not? And we don't do it. We are not bidden do it. If we were——"

"Yes, of course. Of course I see that, Beatrice. Only a person who foists herself into our society under false pretences ought to be——"

"Immaculate?" said Beatrice, quickly.

"I think, I do think, something rather better than--"

"Ourselves?"

"Pray, what is your opinion?" Mrs. Wilde suddenly turned to her nearest companion for assistance, and it was promptly given, though not perhaps in the manner expected.

"I agree with Beatrice," said Miss Kenyon, gently. "I too have been aware of Mrs. Curle's antecedents for a considerable period of time; in fact, for longer than either Beatrice, or I fancy any one else here has been."

"Except me," struck in Constantia Gibbs, who had more than once essayed to interrupt before, but whose interpolation had been steadily ignored. "Except me, ma'am. You can't——"

"I do not except you," said Miss Kenyon, coldly. "I knew the little singing girl before she was taken to your school; and though I confess I would rather that she had not been admitted to the society in which she now finds herself, having been so, it seems to me that it

would be neither right nor just that she should be excluded from it in future."

"May I be allowed to speak?" said a new voice.

"You, Geoffrey? I am sure I wish you would." Mrs. Wilde regarded her husband with an air of relief. "It is really very perplexing, because, of course, it must be decided now or never; so many of us are here——"

("Quite a representative gathering," aside from Tony.)

"And, of course, there is a great deal in what Beatrice says," continued the lady; "and, if Lady Laura feels the same——"

"My mother will," said Beatrice. "I know she will. It will not be a case with her of how she 'feels,' but of what she knows to be right. In a case of this kind my mother will rise above her inclinations, and act on principle."

"Certainly one ought so to act. But, Geoffrey, you have not spoken?"—for he had been waiting patiently—"Do let us have your opinion,"—and Mrs. Wilde calmly proceeded with her own. "Whatever we do, let us act in concert. My dear Beatrice, you are sure, absolutely sure, that this is not a mere question of impulse on your part? That if we decide to take no notice of the present disclosure, we shall have the Maynards' support? You see we are waiting, my husband, Clara, and I? We will follow—shall I say it?" looking towards them, "yes? Very well; we will follow your lead."

"Over hedge and ditch," said the Master, promptly.

"And I will wind the horn for you," nodded his daughter. "And if ever I hear a false 'View, hollo!' I'll recall the hounds. Count on me, Beatrice."

"And on me, by Jove," ejaculated Tony Oldcastle, flushing up with pride and resolution, "and on my people. I'll tell them what you say—and how you said it too. The Oldcastles will follow the Maynards, Beatrice."

"And a poor lone man will trot behind," observed Mr. Bywater.

Gwen slipped her hand into her sister's and squeezed it; poor Beatrice was trembling all over, she had not yet finished.

"You are all so good," she murmured; "and you don't say a word to blame me, yet you can't have forgotten that it was I who insisted on the Curles being taken notice of when they first came; that it was I who vouched for Daisy and put her forward, and gave no one any rest till she was called upon and invited everywhere. I instigated Mr. Curle to join the hunt——"

"Well, well; he makes a very good member," interposed Mr. Wilde, placidly.

"And I put Daisy into the book club, and the golf club—all to get her known. And she does work hard in the parish; but she would never have got beyond the parish—"

"Ha-ha-ha! The parish won't care two hangs what Mrs. Curle was. Don't worry about the parish, Beatrice;"—and again Mr. Wilde laughed aloud, and suddenly every one laughed, and the tension was over. During the latter part of it, Constantia Gibbs had slipped out of the room, no one noticing her exit except Tony, who ceremoniously opened the door for her; "And I hope she liked the attention," chuckled he, to himself. For he was perfectly aware that Constantia would have preferred blindness and the most barefaced neglect to any such recognition of her stealthy flight. As the door closed he bowed with fine irony behind it.

Then he came back and winked to Everest, bubbling with secret glee. "This will be all over Somersetshire in a week," said he. "Poor old Curle, I hope it won't annoy him; but he is pretty stolid; he doesn't mind anything, so long as he gets a good dinner. He is fond of his wife, though."

"He is so fond of her," said Everest, "that I think if he had heard Miss Maynard speak just now-"

"Oh—ah—yes. Beatrice did give it us hot, didn't she? Beatrice is an awfully good sort. And it is quite true what she said, you know. She did take Daisy up, and simply bullied us all into knowing her. Not that I needed bullying;"—with a laugh.

"I never heard anything more nobly argued."

"Argued? Did she argue? I thought she just ordered us, the Wildes and us all."

"She took her stand not on kindness but on justice," said Everest, half to himself. "I should never have thought of that. It would have seemed to me a cruel business to drop a woman because she was not quite what one thought her, but Miss Maynard——" he paused.

"Looked splendid, didn't she?" said Tony, missing the point. "I am awfully afraid of Beatrice," continued he, confidentially, "but I do admire her. And if she says you're all right, you know you are all right, and that it doesn't signify a hang what any one else thinks."

"Yet she seems to say that she makes mistakes herself," said Everest, glancing at her thoughtfully. He felt as if he should like to go on talking of Beatrice and looking at her, but the party was breaking up, and Tony was called from his side.

CHAPTER X.

"AM I MAD OR DREAMING?"

PEOPLE who go about the world picking up casual acquaintances and dropping them with equal facility, can have but little idea of what a revelation such as that narrated in the last chapter means to those who have lived the greater part of their lives in one place, whose minds have been cast from infancy in one groove, and who have not only their own but their forefathers' habits, traditions, and prejudices to struggle with, when receiving a new idea.

To the Maynards, the Wildes, and the Oldcastles, the disclosure made by Daisy Curle's false friend was not a disclosure but an exposure.

Accustomed to knowing all about each other from generation to generation—not even concealing from each other (for the attempt would be futile) any circumstances of grief or shame which have befallen this family or that—a mystery, and especially a mystery of a nature to make them feel outwitted and imposed upon, was of all things the most to be resented in newcomers who had barely escaped being regarded as intruders within their charmed circle.

They had felt themselves extraordinarily tolerant and liberal-minded in that they had received and treated as neighbours a rather vulgar and arrogant couple—poor Willie was not arrogant, but Daisy often made him appear so,—and the older folks, who were not so much impressed by the latter's looks, toilettes, and chatter, as

were their sons and daughters, told each other aside as an excuse for leniency, that there was such an universal mingling of ranks nowadays it was no use attempting to hold out against it. They thought themselves, we say, very easy and modern in acknowledging this.

And no one had held out; not even Lady Laura Maynard, the bulwark of the neighbourhood. Of her all the rest stood in awe, and she had been the first to yield—so that Daisy's triumph had been rapid and complete.

What was it, however, as compared to the present victory of her champion on her behalf? Beatrice had literally swept her audience along with her; wasting no time in fruitless appeals to their compassion, she had held to her one strong point, she had demanded justice for her quondam friend on the ground that she had done nothing worthy of condemnation. It was no sin to have risen from poverty and obscurity to affluence and position. It was no crime to draw a veil over an unfortunate childhood.

And then, as we know, she blamed herself for having with her own hand pushed her friend up the ladder at whose feet Daisy might have paused and hesitated,—and the sight of the proud Beatrice Maynard humbled and beseeching, and perhaps a little secret consciousness that it would make things very awkward at home if there were to be a split in the camp on their return thither, finally won for her the suffrages of all present.

- "But, my dear Beatrice-"
- "Oh, do you want me?" said Beatrice.

She had not been alone with her hostess since the great scene, and, truth to tell, rather dreaded being so; since, although it was easy for Miss Kenyon to account for her own reticence as regarded Daisy Curle, Miss Kenyon might very well be wondering—How about Beatrice Maynard's knowledge?

"Of course I said nothing, my dears, when I found she was your next-door neighbour; one learns to hold one's tongue as one grows old," said she, cheerfully—but this was before Gwen, as the three rolled home in their brougham after the dinner-party; and Beatrice had an intuitive feeling that her cousin was only waiting till she could catch her alone, for more to follow.

The opportunity came all too soon on the following morning when, Gwen having gone upstairs after breakfast, Miss Kenyon turned to her sister briskly.

"There was one little point that I thought you missed last night, my dear, if you will forgive my saying so. You spoke so well, and seemed to understand what you were doing so admirably, that it seems absurd for me to—but it was just this. Would it not have been something in your client's favour—you were a true Portia last night, Beatrice, only needing wig and gown; so you see I talk of your 'client,'—but if you had laid some stress on her having herself confided to you as her friend her story—eh? I fancy that would have told in her favour?"

- "But she did not do it, cousin Augusta."
- "Oh," said cousin Augusta.

"I wish she had," said Beatrice, with an effort, "but Daisy never was open with me. I told her everything;—now, I wish I had not, but I did;—and she pretended to be as frank with me—but never was. She spoke of her travels, and her experiences in one place and another; she spoke a great deal of the people she had met, those Fitzhuberts especially,"—she paused.

"Of course. One can see at a glance in what light Lord and Lady Fitzhubert, smart spendthrifts to whom people such as the Curles are a godsend, look upon them; but she—ahem! she did not confide—yet you knew about her!" "I am not at liberty to say who told me, cousin Augusta."

"Then I shall never ask you again, my dear." ("To think that a man should be such an idiot!" muttered the man's aunt, to herself.) Nevertheless she had noted Everest's eyes resting on the speaker of the night before.

She was revolving the matter in her mind, and wondering whether there were anything further to be learnt or done, when the door opened, and a note was put into Beatrice's hand, which she read with some agitation.

"From Daisy," she said, looking up, "but I can't do it. I can't go to her this morning. I am engaged to meet Clara Wilde at the Academy at twelve; you remember we arranged it last night; so I must just say it is impossible," moving towards the writing-table; but "Stop a moment," said Miss Kenyon, laying a gentle hand upon her arm.

"It is barely half-past ten now," hinted she.

"Oh, but I—I can't," cried Beatrice, with an impetuosity that betrayed her feelings. "Why does she ask it? Why does she want to see me? I have done all I can for her; and now she has got other friends, she does not need me, and—and I can't,"—she wound up vehemently.

"Do you think she suspects anything?"

"No: this is just like all her notes. She was always sending them; begging me to go to her on any sort of pretext. She did not really want me; but she liked people to see me going to The Hollies, and she knew that I would go."

"There can be nothing of that now, you know."

"Oh, there can. She will tell Lady Fitzhubert that she has sent for me——"

"May I see the note, Beatrice?"

"Hum," said Miss Kenyon, meditatively. "I do not

know if I may venture an opinion, but this does not seem to me to be written by a person in quite an ordinary frame of mind. I think, I cannot help thinking, that Mrs. Curle has penned it under excitement, and if so—come, pluck up your courage, Beatrice, for I believe," with deliberate emphasis, "I believe the murder is out."

"Oh, no; oh, surely no," said Beatrice, hurriedly.

"Oh, yes; oh, surely yes," retorted Miss Kenyon.

"And why not? Why should you mind if it be so? You, if any one, have no need to fear meeting your friend; she ought to be grateful to you, if ever woman were; and she may wish to express it. Go to her, my dear—"

" But-but-"

"I understand. You dread a scene. Scenes are always disagreeable; still, this one is bound to come, and as well now as later on."

"I only said what I did, because I had to; I hated doing it. I am so ashamed whenever I think of the whole affair; but I promised to stand by her——"

"And you did, nobly. Well?"

"Can't I say I am engaged?" pleaded Beatrice, piteously. "Can't. I let it wait? We shall be going home directly, and Daisy can say what she pleases then; but just now, just when I want to forget, and had grown to forget——"

"Dear Beatrice, decide for yourself; but were I in your place——"

"You would go?"

" I should."

Beatrice said no more.

The day was still so young that she was not surprised, on inquiring for Mrs. Curle at her hotel, to be told that the lady had not left her room, but that her maid was waiting to show the way thither to an expected visitor—

"Oh, Annette," said Miss Maynard, perceiving Annette, as the hall-porter spoke.

She could not endure Annette, but her manner was always gracious towards dependants, and she now smiled and nodded as in duty bound.

"Is your mistress unwell?" inquired she, as they went off together.

Annette pursed her lips. Really she did not know; to be sure, madam had not eaten any breakfast, and was still in bed; but she did not think madam was ill, and no doctor had been sent for.

"A little overdone, perhaps," said Miss Maynard, quietly. But her heart beat, for she felt that her cousin and counsellor had divined the truth.

A moment later and the feeling resolved itself into a certainty. Daisy, who was young and pretty enough to look to advantage in the morning light under ordinary circumstances—who was a good sleeper, and usually as fresh as her floral prototype when she woke, however late she had been up the previous evening—was now a lamentable sight. Her cheeks were pale; red rims round her eyes told of recent weeping; and her attitude as she crouched upon the pillows, was that of a person unable to lie easily or still. By her side a neglected tea-tray and some unopened letters further testified to mental disturbance; while the rumpled sheets were flung back as though even their light covering had been found unendurable.

"Why, Daisy, what is the matter?" said Beatrice, upon whom none of the above was lost, but who had to consider the presence of a third person. "What have you been doing to yourself? In bed on this lovely morning!"

"Oh, lovely morning!" cried Daisy.

She had received the necessary kiss, and pointed impatiently to a chair. "Thank you for coming, but I knew

vou would. Annette, let no one else in. Oh. Beatrice!" -as the door closed, and the two were alone.

"Well?" said Beatrice.

Now that the maid had gone, she saw no further need for keeping up appearances, and braced herself to listen and endure.

"Would any one have believed it?" burst forth Daisy, suddenly springing up to a sitting attitude. "I always knew that girl had it in her to do anything low and mean, but I didn't think, I couldn't have supposed—how do you think she ended her evening's work? By calmly telling me before them-before Vi Fitzhubert at least, she didn't quite dare before the men-how she had used her opportunity when my back was turned, and repeating to her what she had said to you! At least, did she say it?" eagerly. "That is what I want to know? Beatrice, I know I shall get the truth from you. Did Connie really-" her voice faltered, but her hungry eyes spoke the rest.

"I am afraid-she did."

"The horrid, wicked girl! After all she made me go through, to go and do it at last! She threatened once years ago, when she was angry, that she wouldwould hold that over me-and I knew by her face when we met here in London, that she had not forgotten; but she could pretend to be so good-humoured and pleasant. -oh, what a fool I was to be taken in! Somehow. I really thought she was only teasing; until that day I took her to call on you, and that frightened me a little. But it was seeing me with the Fitzhuberts-oh, Beatrice, wasn't it mean, wasn't it horrible of her? Not that Vi Fitzhubert minds. She says it is nothing to her. And if she doesn't, and you don't-but oh, I can't stand it, I don't believe I can stand it,"—throwing herself down upon the pillows with a burst of weeping;—"it is all very well for Willie to say 'Never mind,'" sobbed she; "but to think 18 * that every one I meet when we go home will be looking at me and pointing at me—even the young men will laugh to each other, and grow less particular what they say before me——"

"Oh, Daisy, no."

"They will. I know they will. They'll think I have no business to mind——"

"Because you were not born quite in our rank of life? My dear Daisy, what are you thinking of? I am very sorry this has happened, and it never ought to have happened, but the skies haven't fallen," said Beatrice, composedly. "If you were told all that took place last night, you must have heard that which will make your return to Somersetshire much less unbearable than you fancy at present. No one is going to laugh at you or point at you. There will be no change in any of your neighbours. Indeed, I think you may count on being treated with even more kindly consideration than formerly, because—"

"Go on," said Daisy, quickly, seeing that she paused.

"I was going to say," proceeded Beatrice, in some embarrassment, "that the older people among us, being, as you know, rather formal and punctilious, did sometimes think your ways not—not quite in accordance with theirs; and now they will understand and not—not expect it."

"They will look down on me, and put up with me?"
Beatrice shrank within herself; how was she to meet
this, the exact truth?

"Isn't that it?" cried Daisy, impatiently. "Of course it is. They will put me down, and set me right whenever I open my lips. ('How should she know?' 'What business has she to give an opinion?') Beatrice, do you think you could stand that yourself?"

"I am very sorry, Daisy,"—with increasing gentleness.

"This is harder on you than I realised at first," appended Beatrice, after a moment's thought. "At first I must say that I thought it was just a little hard on me. You might have told me. It would have been better if you had."

Daisy moved uneasily, plucking at the counterpane with nervous, irritable fingers.

"I don't see how you could expect it of me," muttered she, keeping her face averted. "One is not bound to show oneself up; and I knew how you and the rest of them would feel about it. You accepted me as a lady born, and if you did not find me out for yourselves—." As she spoke it seemed indeed incredible to Beatrice Maynard that they had not done so.

How palpably, how glaringly did voice and phrase and idea all unite in betraying the speaker! What an unspeakable commonness ran through all. It seemed as though a mask had been thrown aside, and she were confronted by a rude, rough face with tongue in cheek.

Be it remembered that whatever her secret knowledge had been, Beatrice had never till now beheld Daisy Curle with all restrictions and considerations thrown aside; and that even when the latter was arbitrary and impertinent towards herself (as repeated by Gwen to Lady Laura) she was still carefully guarded in her language and demeanour. Her powers of acting were considerable, and she had utilised them till they became a second nature; so that whether gay or grave, in good-humour or the reverse, there was nothing of this present sullen vulgarity of tone, the tone of a cowed yet resentful inferior.

"I passed among you all, whatever you may say now," resumed she; for the hint that she had not done so quite so entirely as supposed had galled her to the quick. "And if I did once, I could still. I am as good as anybody. There's nothing the matter with me,"—vanity

re-asserting itself. "Haven't I proved it? And yet just because that spiteful Connie Gibbs goes and blabs,——"

Again Beatrice winced, but again she strove not to show it.

"—I am to have this shame put upon me," concluded Daisy, now pulling at the delicate frills of her expensive dressing-jacket. "That girl, that viper, knew how I should feel about it. If I had been like some—there's Willie now, he laughs and says what harm can it do? He says people will be just as glad to come to our house, and eat our dinners, and drink his wine, as ever they were. He says that as long as he can pay his way—that's his coarse idea of looking at things—(I don't mean to blame Willie, but he thinks money is everything, and I know it isn't, and you know it isn't, and it is we women who rule the roost in society)—oh, Beatrice, you might help me. Not that you didn't stick up for me last night. I know you did that—"

"How do you know?" said Beatrice, surprised. She had hardly expected Miss Connie Gibbs to tell this, and indeed was prepared to hear herself charged with faithlessness.

"How do I know? Not from Connie, you may be sure. She would have let me suppose she had it all her own way, but Major Everest—what?" for there was a faint, irrepressible movement on her companion's part.

"Oh, yes; he came in last night too," proceeded Daisy, in a more complacent tone. "I did not see him, but Willie did; and it was just after that girl had let it all out, and I believe he really came to see if she had, though he made a sort of pretence of asking Willie to go somewhere with him. So of course Willie asked what really happened? And he said you stood up for us; and I meant to thank you, Beatrice, only I forgot;"—she paused and looked up. "I suppose he said nothing? Men never

do. But his coming to see us showed how he felt. Well," disconsolately, "I suppose there's nothing to be done if it really is as Connie said. Willie could not quite make out from Major Everest. If I had been there, I should have made him tell me; but men are so stupid. Although I have been worrying Willie ever since, all I can get out of him is, that there was a scene, and that you took our part. Oh, Beatrice, you will go on taking it, won't you?"

"There will be no need, as I told you, Daisy. When

"There will be no need, as I told you, Daisy. When you go back—"

"But I don't know that I shall go back," said Daisy, suddenly. "I told Willie I should see you first; because I hoped that you might be able to—to say something to comfort me; but if you can't——," and she bit her lips, thinking.

"I am so sorry if I can't. I thought it would comfort you to know that all would go on the same as before. And isn't it better that you should have nothing to conceal?"

"No it isn't. No, I don't believe I shall go back now. There's no reason why I should; one place is as good as another," ran on Daisy, thinking rapidly. "And you are a dreadfully humdrum set of folks down there. We might get in with a livelier set of people, or we needn't go into the country at all. The Fitzhuberts were quite surprised when they heard we had buried ourselves down in a dead-and-alive country neighbourhood. hubert said only last night, before she knew anything of this, that she wondered we could endure it. And that if we didn't care for London, we might at least go into a racing county. And that if we did, they would come to us for the races—I declare I'll make Willie do that. Yes, yes; I will. He won't mind. He is always ready for a change. Then we might snap our fingers at Connie Gibbs:"and she laughed, with rising excitement and exultation.

Beatrice was silent. In her breast there was a struggle going on.

On the one hand what an escape for herself, what a sense of relief and freedom was opened up by the above vision; on the other, what an abyss for this poor heedless soul to plunge into! Could she not put out a finger to save poor reckless Daisy from destruction? To let her become the prey of such people as the Fitzhuberts, and be made use of by them and others of their class in the way indicated, was simply to abandon her to every evil influence by whom all her worst passions would be encouraged, and her better feelings speedily and ruthlessly effaced.

And Daisy was a fellow-creature with an immortal soul. Beatrice trembled.

She had come at last to perceive the truth about Daisy Curle. Daisy was not naturally a bad woman; rather she had a curious innate tendency towards what was respectable, decorous, decent; and when religion was the order of the day, it cost her no effort to adopt as much of its outward form as procured the approbation of those by whom it was held in genuine regard.

But she was weak, vain, and ambitious on a low level; and cast among others who neither cared nor professed to care for anything but pleasure and luxury, those gods would she also worship.

Beyond this she had not so far gone; she had not joined the scoffers, nor the utterly debased; and during the period of her residence in a quiet, orderly neighbourhood she had evinced such an anxiety to conform to its tenets as might yet be worked upon for her own good, if she would return thither and yield herself anew to its influence.

But would she? Beatrice swiftly turned over the pros and cons in her mind.

"You see it is not as if I couldn't have plenty of friends wherever I went,"—suddenly burst forth Daisy, who had also been thinking. "I daresay you would all be sorry to lose me, whatever Connie may think—for I did wake you up; and I'm sure Tony Oldcastle and the Tomlinson boys used to be never out of our house; but one can't help that, one must think of oneself. We could say—let me see—" ruminating—"that Somersetshire was relaxing; it is so, isn't it? Or what should you say it is? But of course you think it all that any one needs, and I must own it suited me well enough. Willie could say he wanted better shooting. What do you think?"

"Don't go, Daisy."

"What? Not go? I daresay you don't want to lose us; and it is very nice of you to say so, I'm sure; but you could come and stop with us, you know; and I would ask Gwen and Kitty too, by-and-by. I shall have to take care that Connie Gibbs doesn't get wind of this though. She must suppose we are stuck down at The Hollies till she is off the field; but she is going directly; she found a wire from her dear papa last night ordering her back; and whatever she may say, she dares not disobey him. So we can keep quiet till she is gone, and then blow up her little scheme. Well, I feel better now. Just give me the eau-de-cologne, will you? And, Beatrice——"

"Dear Daisy, do listen for one moment. I am so sure it would be better, far better for you to go back to your own home, where you have so many interests and occupations. You have forgotten them just at this moment, but——"

"I must go on forgetting them. I can't be troubled with them. You can explain for me; for if I can manage Willie—and, of course I can—we shan't return at all. He can go down to settle things, and Whiteley will move the furniture."

"You would not go down at all!"

"Now, Beatrice, don't be tiresome. Of course not. I'm not a housekeeper; I know nothing about tables and chairs; besides, I hate and detest worrying about such things. I shall stay on here, and—oh, I know. The Fitzhuberts suggested last night that we should have a house for the Cowes week; they want to go, but they can't afford a house; and Vi Fitzhubert says it is the best fun in the year. After that, we could go to Scotland, to make another break; and then Connie would have quite lost trace of us, and we could do what we chose." She threw herself back upon the pillows, all traces of chagrin and distress eliminated from a countenance now lit up by pleasurable anticipation.

"Yes, that will do;" she smiled and nodded. "So now, dear, I must not keep you in any longer on this nice morning. It was so good of you to come, but now I know you are dying to be off;"—and she looked impatient and suggestive.

"I am going," said Beatrice, rising.

"And you must not think I shan't be sorry to part with you, but you do see, don't you, how well this plan works out? And was it not lucky the Fitzhuberts turning up, in spite of its being through them and their giving offence to that horrid girl that all this came about? I am rather glad Vi Fitzhubert knows; she will help me, if anything of the kind should ever happen again. She knows I am quite devoted to her. Beatrice," with a twinge of compunction, "you are not angry with me?"

"I am very-sorry for you, Daisy."

"As to that, I'm sorry for myself, but it can't be helped; and now that I have had it out, I feel better. I shall go to Ranelagh this afternoon. Connie had been going with us, but I shall take Vi Fitzhubert instead, if

she'll go. She won't go everywhere with me, because of course she is very smart, and I am a mere nobody "—the shrill-voiced, consequential little Daisy was herself once more; Beatrice could almost have smiled to see how soon the old airs and graces were again in force, but that her heart felt sick and sore at such folly, and at the future which she foresaw opening before the poor infatuated creature—"However, I can but ask her," concluded Daisy, now palpably looking to her friend to go.

"Are you quite determined?" said Beatrice, in a low voice.

"Quite. So it is no use trying to shake my resolution. I was feeling dreadfully bad when you arrived—oh, dear, it all comes back upon me now," with a sudden catch of the breath—"I had forgotten it for a moment; but there, it's no use making a fuss. And don't you see, Beatrice," eagerly, "that if I listened to you and went back to The Hollies—as I see you still want me to do, though you don't say anything—I should always be down in the dumps? There would be nothing to help me to forget. You know how things cling to one in the country, don't you?"

Did she not? Beatrice knew only too well.

"So then, Spread your wings and fly, say I," cried Daisy, gaily. "Ta-ta, Beatrice; you solemn Beatrice: you are not over pleased at this, I see; but you know me—when I say a thing I stick to it," and self-will set in on the pretty little face which had now regained much of its wonted expression, though colour still was wanting. "Goodness, what a fright I look!" cried she, catching up a hand-glass which had been hastily popped beneath the pillow on the arrival of her visitor, "but a soupçon of rouge—oh get away, there's a dear, I ought not to say the word 'Rouge' before you. Beatrice," with a slight, a very slight, return to seriousness, "you are too good for me; your whole world is too good for me."

"Indeed, indeed, dear Daisy——" trying to take her hand.

"No, no," said Daisy, pulling it back. "No. Let me go. I don't care to be good; I don't wish to be good, as you call good. I'm only a poor little thing that likes to be petted and admired, and can't stand being preached at and called to order. I do well enough; and it isn't my fault if you and your set are too grand for me."

"But we should not be too grand for you," said Beatrice, earnestly. "Dear, don't go away from us; don't throw yourself among people who will drag you down——"

"How uncivil you are. The Fitzhuberts would stare indeed, if they heard that. They drag me down! I can't help laughing"—but the laugh was a forced one.

"At least you will wait a few days before you decide. You are upset and excited now, and no wonder; but if you will think matters over——"

"You suppose that I have not thought? That's all you know about it," cried Daisy, with another laugh. "Willie and I have had this in view ever since—what I mean is that we never meant to stay in any place where it was known about—about us. There was a woman once at your house—that Miss Adam who came to you as Lady Laura's companion—I don't know where or how she had found it out, but she knew about me, and I thought she was going to blackmail me. She did try it on; that is, she let me know that she had my secret, but she never went beyond that. And what on earth she did it for, unless she wanted to get something out of me (which fell through, I suppose), goodness knows!"

"Miss Adam!"

"The odd little creature in curls. A regular old cat. But whatever her game was, something stopped her playing it. Now, Beatrice, I really do want to get up. This is just like our old 'Good-byes,' isn't it? when I

used to follow you down to the gate, and we would stand there talking forever, because we always seemed to have more and more to say—Beatrice," calling after her, as she reached the door.

Beatrice stopped, and looked round.

"I make you a present of Major Everest. He-he-he!" giggled Daisy. The door-handle turned, and Beatrice was gone, the echo of a mocking laugh in her ears.

In the hall she encountered Miss Connie Gibbs presiding over a pile of enormous trunks. "Been to see your friend, Miss Maynard?"

Miss Maynard walked steadily on, but the other blocked her path.

- "Feels pretty bad I s'pose," continued she, sarcastically; "they mostly do when——"
 - "Allow me to pass, please."
- "Oh, certainly. I was only going to say that if she thinks I've done with her——"
 - "A hansom," said Beatrice, to the hall-porter,
- "——she doesn't know Constantia Gibbs. I'm off for the present——" but Beatrice heard no more.

Her head was in a whirl, her pulses throbbing, and it seemed but a second ere she was at the door of Burlington House, where, although longing to be alone, she had now to keep her appointment with Clara Wilde.

It was past twelve o'clock, but Clara would excuse her being late; and she was mechanically searching in her purse for the fare, when a hand was held out, and she saw that even another minute's solitude was to be denied her. Major Everest, the last person in the world she would have wished to see at the moment, was standing on the Academy steps, ready to assist her to descend.

What unlucky chance had sent him there? Although she could not actually charge him with being the author of all this trouble, he had certainly involved her in it more deeply than needs must, and she had firmly resolved that, come what might, she would avoid any possibility of further explanations and confidences.

He would perhaps want to thank her—be grateful and nonsensical and full of Daisy and her wrongs? That should be prevented, if nothing else could. She would never see him alone, never for a moment.

Gwen would help her now; and she and Gwen had arranged this, it being Gwen's part to stick to her sister's side through thick and thin in any future meetings.

Only a few days remained during which there was a likelihood of the former's services being required, and it had seemed as if this brief period might be got through safely, since neither of the plotters had conceived the possibility of Everest's being at the Academy during the morning hours, when only rigid picture lovers or country cousins reverted thither—but "the best laid plots o' mice and men?" we know what becomes of them.

"Miss Wilde is waiting for you," said Everest, cheerfully. "She sent me down to see if you were coming,"—and he stepped upstairs by her side, as if his joining the party were a matter of course.

What was to be done? Nothing. She could not drive the man away, nor even show by look or manner that his presence was unwelcome; all she could do was to be civil, alert, and devoted to the object or objects in hand.

She had come to see the pictures, still more to show Clara Wilde the pictures—having already been herself once or twice to the galleries. Clara wanted to waste no time, but to be taken straight to this one and that approved by public estimation; so that, on her return to Somersetshire, she could talk with the best when the inevitable topic was started at country dinner-parties.

"I should not care if I never saw an Academy

from one year to another," explained the downright girl frankly to Everest. "I know nothing about pictures; they are not in my line; but the people at home expect one to have gone; so Beatrice is just going to rush me through them, and tell me which I am to say are good and which are horrible."

"That is just what I should be grateful for being told too," said he, eagerly. "Will Miss Maynard allow another disciple to attach himself, or shall I be in the way?"—looking to her across the intervening figure, for she had slipped round to Clara's other side.

A minute before, he had not seen why he should be in the way; there was surely no reason for supposing his companionship an intrusion—but now he felt slightly embarrassed. Miss Maynard did not respond to his overture as readily as might have been anticipated. She was not rude, but she was stiff—and her eyes were glued to the catalogue in her hand.

Clara Wilde would have loitered and chatted; glancing round the walls as a sort of adjunct to chit-chat, which roved over a variety of topics—but Beatrice held unrelentingly to her role of guide and authority. From her pocket she produced a pencil, with which she marked Clara's book from her own, Clara meanwhile talking and laughing aside with Everest; and on more than one occasion they lost her and had to look for her, as she had wandered away by herself.

"Does she really care so very much for pictures, or is it only because Beatrice is so desperately conscientious that she will carry through anything she undertakes? What do you think, Major Everest?" cried his companion at last. "For my part, there is nothing in the world bores me like a picture gallery," confessed she, gaily; "and the bad air always makes my head ache. Beatrice is an open-air girl too; and we never consider that any of the

Maynards, except Lady Laura, go in for art. Yet to look at Beatrice——" she paused. "I believe she is thinking of something," she exclaimed as by a sudden impulse; and simultaneously the eyes of both turned towards a motionless figure whose back was turned, but who to all appearance was absorbed in gazing at an elaborate composition which excited no interest in any one else.

"Perhaps she is thinking of last night?" murmured Clara, with a little mischievous twinkle in her eye.

Hitherto a certain reticence had prevented her from alluding to "Last night," as to which it was generally felt that they had all been somewhat too demonstrative, and that, though delightfully exciting, the scene was rather awesome to contemplate in the light of day.

"Of course being in a private room, and quite among ourselves," Mrs. Wilde had pronounced, "we could speak more freely than would have been possible otherwise; but we must be very careful how we mention the circumstance to those who were not there."

Clara, however, argued with herself that Major Everest had been there. Also that Major Everest was such a nice man, and had behaved so well, and—and altogether; she could not resist a sly glance, and Everest, who had the same thought in his mind, showed it.

His eyes travelled gravely back from a moment's earnest survey of the mute, intent form; and after a slight hesitation he replied to the above, "Miss Maynard felt what took place at the Carlton to be painful, I am afraid. She could hardly help doing so."

"It gave us all a shock. It was abominable—that American girl's conduct. So vulgar, too. And poor Beatrice—the Maynards, you know, have the Curles just at their front door, so it is worse for them than for any of us."

"I thought Miss Maynard acted very nobly."

"So she did. I have known Beatrice Maynard since she was so high," indicating, "and I never yet knew her do anything that was not-well, it may be odd, but 'Noble' is the only word I can use. To tell the truth," continued the speaker, confidentially, "we were all rather astonished that she made a friend of Mrs. Curle. Oh. perhaps I should not say that to you," with a sudden recollection, for Everest had been brought by the Curles to her father's house, and he might be now resenting the implied slight to them. He had taken no part in the scene at the Carlton, and as he was also silent now, she ran on apologetically; "I mean nothing against your friends: they were our friends too, you know, and we are to go on as if nothing had happened—which will be easy enough for us, as we live at a distance; but it will be awkward for the Maynards, especially as Beatrice took the initiative last night. Every one will know that she did so"—she paused.

"And she will suffer for it?"

"She will have to abide by it. She can't drop them now; however, she would not if she could. Beatrice would stand to her guns—hush! she is coming back to us."

"Shall we go on to the next room?" said Beatrice; "there are not many more, but if we linger too long here——"

"It was you who were lingering. Major Everest and I were ready long ago," rejoined Clara, laughing; "but you seemed so delighted with that wonderful production," pointing merrily to the canvas, "that we forbore to disturb you. Your back said, 'Let me alone'. What you saw in it——"

"I don't fancy it would interest you," said Beatrice, somewhat hastily, and she led the way and the others

followed to another room. ("As I thought, she never looked at it," nodded Clara Wilde to herself.)

If she had ever fancied that there had been anything or might have been anything between her present companions, she was now quite certain that she would not entertain the idea in future. Beatrice, it was true, now dropped the ardour with which she had started in her capacity of guide and counsellor, and replaced it with a little friendly raillery on the lack of appreciation evinced by the two who had been so ready to place themselves beneath her tutelage; but though she allowed herself to be more "Human," according to her friend, and ran her eyes through the increasing number of spectators at Clara's bidding, noting this or that of feminine interest, she seldom if ever addressed herself voluntarily to Everest.

He was not avoided, oh dear, no; he was often included in a remark or appeal; but the group held persistently together, and Clara found herself invariably in the centre of it.

This, however, was easily explicable. There was no doubt that Beatrice at times looked a trifle preoccupied; of course she was thinking of Daisy Curle; and as it was quite likely that she did not wish to talk of Daisy Curle, she might be glad that her friend had a cavalier to amuse her. Otherwise it might have been dull for Clara.

"Oh, Miss Wilde! How delightful to meet here! And how strange to run across you the very first thing!" And a burly country rector, with his wife and a couple of girls, surrounded their squire's daughter with beaming countenances. "Here we are, and here's all Somersetshire, I fancy," continued the speaker, looking round with evident pride. "Just seen the Tomlinsons; and Bessie saw young Birch at the door. And your father and mother, are they here?"

"And oh, Miss Wilde, did you see that splendid foreign-looking man with the red fez, and several men in uniform showing him about?" struck in Miss Bessie. "An Indian Maharajah, father says."

"No, no, my dear. Say 'Father thinks,'" corrected the oracle, complacently. "In the big room, Miss Wilde. A fine-looking fellow with quite a crowd about him. These girls wouldn't look at anything else. Pictures? Pho-pho! Not a picture did they care for——"

"Have you seen the Queen's picture, Miss Wilde?" It was now the matron's turn; and the kindly, motherly creature was Clara's special friend at home; she must try not to feel her troublesome now. "Every inch a queen she looks and ought to look," cried she, her honest face flushed with enthusiasm. "It made me feel very, very loyal; it did indeed."

"We could not get mother away from that picture," asserted Miss Bessie.

"And you have seen the snow scene, of course?"—the rector started afresh. "Could hardly get up to it at first; but when I did I kept my place; I wouldn't budge though there were people joggling my elbow all the time——"

"I didn't care for the snow scene so very much;"—from Bessie.

Escape was hopeless. Clara had not appreciably opened her lips, yet she was to all appearance engaged in an animated conversation, and so engulfed by the newcomers that Major Everest was of necessity out in the cold. Beatrice had drifted away from the other two just before the meeting took place, and now, when the popular and besieged Miss Wilde looked round, her other companion had also disappeared.

At the same moment some one else became aware of his vicinity. How did she know? It might have been

any one who was standing at her elbow, arrested by the same attraction which had drawn her thither; yet the full minute which she allowed to pass in apparent absorption was utilised for gathering her wits before a dreaded encounter.

"I fancy there is something wrong about that piece of distance, Major Everest; it does not seem to me to recede far enough. We are so accustomed to space in our part of the world that though I don't understand painting, I do know how a stretch of open country ought to look."

"Yes," said he, absently.

"Miss Wilde knows too," said Beatrice, looking round for her.

"She has met some friends and—and joined them. Need we go back?"—for she was turning to retreat. "It will be easy to find Miss Wilde, for she is only on the other side of the doorway, but——"

"We must not lose her. It is getting late."

"We have nearly finished our sightseeing, however, and——"

"You are not an ardent sightseer. I almost wonder you came—it was a case of duty, I suppose; and you are thankful it is over. Why should one always think it necessary to 'do' the Academy, when the fine old pictures——"

"I know; we utterly neglect them. And to tell the truth, I only came here to-day because I chanced to hear you say you were coming, and I wished to——"

"To get the benefit of my wisdom. I hope it has answered the purpose, and you will be able to say——"but he was determined to be heard.

She knew now it was coming; she knew by his voice it was coming.

"Miss Maynard, I wanted to tell you how deeply I

appreciated the part you took in what happened last night," said he, earnestly. "It was exactly what I might have expected; and when I took the great liberty of interceding with you on behalf of our mutual friend——"

"Oh, dear; yes. I remember you did say something once, Major Everest; but it is so long ago—however, I am glad you were satisfied. What a silly scene it was," cried Beatrice, airily, "the sooner forgotten the better. That is good now; that is really good, don't you think?"—and she stared resolutely at a picture without a notion what she was looking at.

"I wonder if Mrs. Curle will ever know all?" proceeded he, obstinately. He was not to be put off, albeit she feigned not to hear.

"Do you think she will?" he went on, receiving no reply. "She is very quick; and unless your neighbours are extremely cautious——"

"I really can't answer for our neighbours, Major Everest. I can't mount guard over them;"—with a shade of involuntary petulance. "Don't you think we had better let it alone, the whole affair, I mean? There is nothing more to be done;" and she moved on a step farther as though to close the conversation.

But he was obtuse, perverse; he could not see that he was losing ground with every word he spoke. What he longed to express was something of the strange new emotion with which he was beginning to regard this beautiful girl, whom he had always known to be beautiful, but had never felt to be so before—what he burned for her to perceive was that a bond of sympathy had sprung up between them, and that they were now united by a common interest.

To other people Daisy Curle and her unlucky secret might be only a passing subject for curiosity and conjecture, but he and Beatrice felt differently and felt in unison. Delightful idea! They had entered into a compact; and now he would fain renew that compact, and make it the occasion for a silent understanding to be sacredly cherished and utilised.

Poor little Daisy! He would harp upon the theme; and Beatrice would take it up, till the duet would perhaps run away altogether from its original starting-point, but would nevertheless still be a duet. What does a theme matter once it has served its turn?

It may be asked, since when had Everest so felt and dreamed?

He could not himself have answered the question. Every meeting with Beatrice Maynard, beginning with that in which he had led her into her father's diningroom, on the occasion of his being first introduced to the family, had made a certain impression—but an outside influence had been brought to bear upon inner misgivings in order to remove that impression.

Everest was a poor man; and Daisy Curle took care that he should remember he was a poor man. She saw what he was blind to. He never supposed himself worthy a thought in the mind of the high-born heiress of Maynard Towers, and nothing was easier than to fix that conviction permanently on his mind. To speak the plain truth, he was at pains to prevent himself from falling in love.

Yet more than once he had felt the task difficult. Beatrice, usually stiff and stately in the presence of her own people, would gradually emerge from her crust when alone with him, and be so gay and winning—as on that wintry afternoon when the two walked on and on over the frosty ground, and the hours flew—that he would sigh Heigho! as he contemplated his bachelorhood.

Then Daisy, suspecting this, would bustle to disperse the pensive shade upon his brow. He never owned that it had anything to do with Beatrice; but with consummate skill, she would so speak and act that by the time she had done with him, he would mentally find himself half laughing at and half cursing the folly which made him find a magnet in one so far above and beyond him as Sir Henry Maynard's daughter.

He would flirt a little with Daisy the same evening. That was all right; there was no danger for him in anything of that sort; and it was as well to dissipate memories that were inclined to linger over other scenes.

Daisy never touched him, not in the remotest degree, beneath the surface; and to do the little woman justice, she knew this, and was content to have it so—but it was necessary to her vanity that, so far as she went, she should have no rival. "And really the Maynards may be grateful to me;"—she silenced all compunction; "it would be absurd for Beatrice to throw herself away upon a nobody like Major Everest."

Everest returned from the war, his military career at an end, his prospects uncertain, even his health precarious, was certainly no improvement on the former Everest as a suitor for Miss Maynard's hand. How then came it about that he did not now restrain with even more resolution than before the risings of admiration within his breast? How was it indeed? We are not going to say.

But was there ever such a blunderer? Daisy Curle with her paltry secret was nothing to him—and he let it appear as though it were everything. He thought to work it on his behalf—he threw it up as a barrier.

And the barrier needed no strengthening, for it was already there, always there. "He shall not draw me on to speak of it," muttered Beatrice, to herself.

Her aspect was gay and indifferent, with a trifle of contempt thrown in. Anything he wished to learn about

the Curles he could go to themselves for; she would not even tell him that she had been with Daisy, or could enlighten him in any wise on her feelings and projects; he should merely perceive that the subject was distasteful.

"Is that American girl likely to tell her what she did?" inquired he, stupidly. "I should say not; but what do you think?"

"Really I—I have no opinion to offer."

"For her own sake she would keep it dark," pursued he; "she cut a sorry figure, whereas you----"

"I was forced to say what I did. It is no matter; the whole thing—"

"And so many people of the neighbourhood present," rejoined he, eagerly. "A better time could not have been chosen, but I fancy——"

"They will forget. It could not interest them. It is not as if it had been one of us"—she moved on with a gesture of proud impatience, but the next moment he was by her side and re-commencing undauntedly.

"You will soon be at home again, I suppose? You will then find out how far the mischief has gone, how deeply it has struck? I daresay you will go back before the Curles do."

"The Curles?" She stood still and looked at him. "The Curles may never go back at all," said she, and drew a long breath, and slowly, very slowly, reared her head. He gazed at her confounded. She turned her back on him, and walked straight into the other room.

All her best and purest feelings had been drawn out by the peril, or what she regarded as the peril, of poor, deluded Daisy Curle; she had acknowledged the authority of a Higher Power which commanded her to save if possible a fellow-creature from the allurements of folly and vice; but the suggested conjunction of Everest and herself in the effort was too much. What had he to do with it? Why should he meddle with it? If he still desired to associate himself with that vain, frivolous woman let him—but he should do it alone for her; and truth to tell, despite the approval of her conscience, which commended the part she had played in her interview with Daisy, she almost wished it had never taken place.

With a hasty and determined step she now regained the side of Clara Wilde, and urged the lateness of the hour as an excuse for cutting short farewells and returning home at once.

"Oh, we are all coming," said Clara; but Beatrice darted off by herself, and her two companions were left looking at each other.

On the way back to Grosvenor Place, a plan of action was rapidly resolved upon. Miss Kenyon and Gwen must, of course, be taken into confidence to a certain extent; they must be told of what had transpired at Brown's Hotel, both in the bedroom and in the hall—but in respect to Major Everest she could and would keep her own counsel. Neither her cousin nor her sister would suppose him likely to have approached the subject in the presence of a third person, and they need never know that an opportunity out of Clara's presence had been seized upon and made use of.

He should never have another. She flung open the doors of the hansom and ran up the steps of her cousin's house, saying to herself again and again that he should never have another.

"Where is cousin Augusta?"

"Cousin Augusta is not very well and is not coming down to luncheon," said Gwen, who was already seated at table, eating cold lamb and salad with her accustomed healthy appetite. "She says it is nothing, but I do hope it is not influenza, for it sounds rather like it. She wants to be quiet this afternoon; and we are to take the carriage and go where we like. It will be rather nice, won't it?"

"Are we not to see her?"

"Not till the doctor has been, and says if we may."

Beatrice breathed a sigh of relief; Gwen was easily managed, much more easily than Miss Kenyon would have been; indeed, a few questions and answers disposed of her morning with this placid interrogator, whose mind was running on other matters; her sister had only to be interested in them, and Daisy Curle and all connected with her dropped out of sight.

Then Fate did Miss Maynard a good turn.

"Influenza, beyond a doubt," decided the medical authority, who had paid his visit during the girls' absence an hour or so later; and on their return from the afternoon's outing they were confronted by the vexatious intelligence. Gwen uttered a dismal exclamation; Beatrice with difficulty repressed one of rejoicing. For here was her door of escape; and satisfied that her kind hostess was in no danger, but had merely contracted the fashionable malady in a mild form, she was at liberty to act at once upon a decision whose wisdom no one could dispute.

The sisters' visit was within a few days of its termination as matters stood; she now announced that they would take their leave on the following morning.

"Oh, must we?" sighed Gwen, to whom the beauties of Somersetshire offered nothing which could compare with the sweets of London life,—but "Of course we must," rejoined her sister, resolutely. "This house is not an hotel; we are not here as a convenience; and as we are not to be allowed to see cousin Augusta, ring the bell for Jane, and tell her to pack up this evening, while I send a telegram." And she seated herself at the writing-table.

The station cab was at the door, the luggage piled upon the top, and two of the travellers waiting in the hall, when there was a light tap at the door of the sickroom, and suffering this to be her only herald of approach, Beatrice followed it on the instant, and stood by her cousin's side.

"Did you think I could go without a word?" cried she. "Never mind if I do catch this thing. Dear cousin, I would catch it a thousand times over, rather than steal away like a thief in the night. And you have been so very, very kind——" but despite herself there was a new and startled ring in the accents of affection and gratitude.

For Miss Kenyon, not anticipating the visit, had been at no pains to prepare for it; and now, with her hair smoothly parted for the pillow and bereft of its usual accessories, her countenance exhibited such a marked and extraordinary resemblance to——

"Dear girl, you ought not to have run this risk; but it was just like you, so unselfish and courageous—but, dear Beatrice, don't hang over me, stand a little away;"—and the invalid waved her hand with playful determination. "Still, now that you are here, you might as well—is Martha there?"—and Miss Kenyon peered round the curtain. "No? Never mind, I know where they are. It is only two little gifts I have for you and Gwen, and there is one for Kitty, too—in that drawer, the left-hand one, Beatrice," indicating with her finger, "it is locked, but here is the key; and there are three red jewel cases—they are only little things, my dear;"—sitting up, and watching as the drawer was opened.

The red cases were seen directly—but so was something else which Miss Kenyon had forgotten. At the back of the drawer, a deep and narrow one containing valuables, a curious item, placed there for safety and

secrecy, revealed itself at the first glance; and Beatrice could scarce forbear an ejaculation which would have betrayed its presence, as her eyes fell upon—a brown wig with ringlets. "Am I mad, or dreaming?" cried she to herself, as she flew downstairs.

CHAPTER XI.

"I WONDER YOU CAN NAME HIM TO ME!"

"WELL, if it pleases your mother," said Sir Henry Maynard, summing up his conclusion on the event of the neighbourhood, which had been under discussion between him and his daughters; and as what pleased Lady Laura was a matter of first consequence to him, and what pleased other people relatively nowhere, his tone was placid and benignant, and the sentence finished itself.

For her ladyship was not merely pleased, she was delighted, and allowed herself to own she was delighted—which was quite another thing—at the great piece of news just announced. The Hollies was sold, and the purchaser was Lady Laura's own especial friend and relation, Miss Augusta Kenyon.

"Could anything be more fortunate?" cried the former. "So often as I have wished to meet dear Augusta again, and yet the time never seemed propitious for inviting her here. Now it is no case of inviting; she comes of herself, comes to reside in her own house; and we shall have all the benefit of her society, without being bound to provide for her amusement."

Full of projects and plans, the speaker then retired to write a joyful letter of anticipation and welcome, and her husband and daughters continued the conversation, which ended in Sir Henry's taking up his newspaper with the expression narrated above.

It will thus be seen that Daisy Curle had carried into effect the hasty resolution formed directly she learned that

her false friend had not exceeded the truth in her account of what had taken place at Tony Oldcastle's dinner-party.

She had hoped against hope until Beatrice Maynard, upon whose word she could rely, cut the ground from beneath her feet; and then, as we know, had resisted all the latter's persuasions and flouted her representations;—and although Beatrice had inwardly half expected that time and reflection would modify the determination so suddenly taken, or that it would not at least be acted upon in its entirety, she was mistaken.

Vanity, cowardice, and love of novelty united in Daisy's bosom to applaud her proposed line of action; while, on the other hand, she was held back by no considerations to her view worth thinking about.

She now only wondered that she had borne for so long the monotony of quiet country life, and cared for the opinion of a dull set of people with whom she had nothing in common.

There had always been an effort; and although success was sweet, she was conscious of many moments when even the triumph of mingling in society to which she had not been born, and obtaining a foothold in houses whose portals would naturally have been closed to her, was felt to be dearly bought, entailing as it did constant watchfulness, perseverance, and assiduity in the art of pleasing.

With people like the Fitzhuberts the case was different. True, they were as far removed from her by birth and breeding as were the Maynards, the Wildes, and the Oldcastles;—but below the surface there was congeniality of taste and a similar standard of conduct; so that, whereas with Beatrice Maynard she could at best but feign to be in sympathy, with Lady Fitzhubert she felt not merely a genuine but a passionate desire to assimilate.

But enough of Daisy Curle—shallow, selfish, impertinent, hypocritical; the growth of an hour, she vanishes

in an hour—to spring up in another soil perchance not as a mushroom, but as a fungus; the parasite of whatever she feeds upon—with no root, no fibre, no continuity of grasp-we will leave her to adhere where she will, and return to a purer and more fragrant atmosphere.

"It was not your fault, my dear;" Lady Laura, gentler and more sympathetic in dealing with her daughter than she would once have been, endeavoured to re-instate Beatrice in her own esteem. "You did what you could; and, though it was a mistake to begin with, no one can accuse you of not having endeavoured to retrieve your error. I am glad you said what you did as regards myself. I-ahem !-also was misled; and gave more countenance than I should have done to a little mischievous interloper who forced herself upon my notice, and completely took me in. You may remember, however, Beatrice, that I did do it under protest. That I was sometimes suspicious of Daisy's extreme and uncalled-for activity in parish work, and her determination to outdo all that had hitherto been done. It did seem to me that there was something strained and artificial about Daisy Curle; something not quite nice—yet it was difficult to say what it was. And you were always on her side— What? Quite so, my dear. Far be it from me to reproach you. And I repeat that you were right, emphatically right in vouching for me, that I should adopt the line of conduct you laid down for us all, had the Curles returned to live again among us. Mrs. Wilde and Mrs. Oldcastle would naturally have looked to me—yes, you said they did, at least the Wildes did-and I feel gratified," continued Lady Laura, whose stilted phraseology covered more emotion than she was perhaps herself aware of. "that you should have so boldly proclaimed your conviction that I should follow the dictates of principle rather than those of inclination."

"Mother, I knew you would." So earnest was the tone that Lady Laura did what she very seldom did—she rose and implanted a kiss upon her daughter's brow.

But now, behold a new complication! Daisy Curle was disposed of, and there was a relief untold in the thought; still how was it possible for Beatrice to join in the universal acclamation which hailed the future occupant of The Hollies as an acquisition to the neighbourhood?

Not only the wig and curls lay like a stone at her heart, but there was Everest—Everest, whom she had evaded and got rid of; fondly hoping never again to be troubled with him—there was he, and there would he remain, to be reckoned with in future.

"I am taking the shooting for my nephew," wrote Miss Kenyon; "Major Everest will have to leave the Armymuch to his own regret though not to mine-and he has promised to take up his residence with me, and be to me as a son. I tell you this, my dear Laura, in order that his position in the neighbourhood may be understood and established from the first. He is formally and legally constituted my heir; and I desire that this may be known, as I owe it to him that he should not be thought dependent on my caprice. We shall reside mainly at The Hollies, which Houston already knows and approves of-(and of course its proximity to Maynard Towers is a great attraction to me)—but we shall also keep on the house in Grosvenor Place, -as, not being quite such a stay-at-home as you, my dear cousin, I shall take a frisk up to Town whenever I feel disposed; and tell Kitty that when she and I have become acquainted. we must have a little talk together about a season for her by-and-by." Lady Laura beamed, and Kitty danced for glee—but the heart of Beatrice sank within her when she heard this read aloud.

How very, very hard it was!

Of course the odious episode with its worst memories was over—but, for all that, a feeling remained.

Everest could never be as an ordinary man to her; she must always connect him with a sense of mortification and humiliation; always bear in mind that she had once been deceived by a manner which all women found delusive.

To do him justice, she owned that it was probably born with him. She was certain that he exercised it involuntarily. Often it won for him concessions of whose magnitude he was unaware; and if this were pointed out, he would be found ignorant of having supposed that what he asked for was a concession at all.

It was all manner; and having once found out this trick of manner, it would never again impose upon her;—but she secretly marvelled that every one else should be so easily oblivious of the past, and confident of the future.

She could not go beyond endurance in her contemplation of the vista which opened.

"It's rare luck for your cousin getting the Curles' furniture," announced Sir Henry, who never went through the village at this juncture without hearing or seeing something to relate. "'Pon my word, if she had had to buy tables and chairs for that house, it would have taken months. It took the whole summer before the Curles got in, d'ye recollect? And vans by the score, cutting up the gravel—they ought never to have laid down the gravel till the inside work was done—but Curle knew nothing about a house, and so he had to lay it all afresh. With his money, I don't suppose he cared. Queer, their leaving it all though; after getting it together, and making everything so comfortable. Uncommonly comfortable I always think that house. Not a nook or cranny that isn't well done by. And how a

man can fly off with only his carpet-bag—naked as when he was born——"

"My dear Henry!"

But Sir Henry was not to be stopped. "Just a shirt and a toothbrush," chuckled he; "and she with her bonnets and fol-de-rols. Off the two go like a pair of migrants; with no more compunction than the swallows have for leaving the nest they built and thought so much of six months before! Migrants? I call them vagrants. I would rather live in the humblest hut I could call my own, than wander from palace to palace—Venice included,"—with a critical afterthought.

His wife agreed with him; she owned that travel did not attract her,—from her tone it was clear that she despised it.

"Now here is your cousin Augusta, sensible woman," proceeded her husband, "the moment she has money to do so, she settles down. I don't quite understand her caring to keep up two houses,—but as the one was left to her that might alter the case. She'll not go near it often, I fancy. She'll be monstrous snug in the Curles' villa, everything in a ring fence, and no outlying expenses except the keeper's wages. Everest will look after that part of the business; and she may just potter round her greenhouses, and drive about the country, and make friends with her neighbours and the cottage people. Your introduction, my dear," to his wife, "will be all she needs to get within our Somersetshire wall of defence. If you could blast that wall and make it admit the poor vagabond Curles, you have only to lift up your little finger for a woman of your own standing, with a fine bachelor nephew to boot."

This was the moment dreaded by Beatrice. Lady Laura, however, replied in her quietest voice. "Certainly Major Everest's having already been at several houses as a passing visitor will ensure his welcome as a resident.

We must all feel the compliment of his caring to return permanently to the neighbourhood."

"And he'll have capital shooting," mused Sir Henry. "Capital. Curle did that part of the business well. Never shot it too hard, as those moneyed men usually do; and was not above taking advice as to the stocking and preserving. Both woods and stubble will be teeming, when Everest comes to shoot them. Lucky fellow! I don't doubt it was he who put the notion of buying The Hollies into his aunt's head."

Nor did Beatrice doubt it; and felt no more amiable for the thought, which was a fresh sting to her pride; but she took an opportunity of speaking gaily to Gwen.

"This will be the very thing for father and mother, but I don't see where we come in, Gwen. You and Kitty and I won't get much good out of The Hollies now; for of course cousin Augusta will have to be careful about inviting us or making much of us, in case poor mother feels neglected; and Major Everest has shown he doesn't find the Misses Maynard dangerous"—laughing. "It will really be rather amusing, knowing what we know, to have all the neighbours watching and conjecturing—as of course they will—while all the time there is absolutely nothing to watch for."

"You will not mind, will you?" said Gwen. "I was half afraid you might," continued she, after a pause.

Beatrice looked at her steadily. "It might have been tiresome if he had been anything but what he is, perfectly and palpably unconscious. What a blessing it is when a man is dense. He never saw; and now there is nothing to see. I daresay we shall be very good friends; and it is not likely that we shall see much, not too much of Major Everest. He will have other men to shoot with him in the shooting season, and he is sure to be a good deal away the rest of the time."

"I don't know that. He said once that if he were not in the Army, he would always live in the country."

"Said that to please you. Haven't you found him out yet? If he had been speaking to a London girl, he would have said there was no living out of London."

"Then why does he get cousin Augusta to come here?" said Gwen, promptly. "She had no idea of coming when we were with her; and any one could see she was ready to do whatever her dear Houston chose. A man may say things to please a girl, but he does them to please himself; hey, Beatrice?"

"Brilliantly argued. Since when have you become so clever?" cried Beatrice, merrily. "I can't answer that; I can't indeed. Let me try though. Of course Major Everest will like to have a country house and ask his friends down, and play the great man,"—with a 'slightly ironical air; "it must be a change after knocking about the world as a nobody. But you may depend upon it that neither of those two will ever turn in to stay-at-homes like us. They will gad up to Town at every opportunity, and call it wintering in the country if they have only two or three months of the Riviera—"

"Oh, the Riviera! Oh, how I should love to do that!" struck in Gwen, piteously. "Why don't we? Even the Oldcastles go; and the Wildes only stay here because of the hunting—and they manage to dash off in April besides. I do think father might take us—"

"Well, well; never mind," said Beatrice, soothingly.

"Perhaps cousin Augusta will. There, you may take that solace to your spirit, and 'hope on, hope ever'——"

"Oh, Beatrice! Do you really think-"

"I think it is not impossible. There is more chance of something of the kind coming off now than there ever was before. But even if there were not, somehow I don't feel so bad about it as I once did. It used to make me wild—it doesn't now. I should like to travel; I should like it more than I can tell; it seems to me as if I could scarcely bear to go out of the world without ever having seen it; it is so full of wonderful things——"

"Oh, I don't care about the wonderful things," owned Gwen, frankly. "It isn't them I mind about."

"No, I don't suppose it is;" Beatrice laughed, but not unkindly. "We have different tastes; but you as well as I have fretted because you could not have what you longed for——"

"I have, I have; I do, I do. I can't help fretting and longing——"

"Try," said her sister, in a low voice; then she leaned forward and her face grew soft and earnest. "Try, dear. I am trying; I have been trying for some time past. It was not easy at first, but it is easier now. I think of it, not as our parents' fault, but as-God's will. He gave us this beautiful home, and we have very much that is delightful and congenial in it. If we have to do without some of the pleasures that come in the way of other girls of our age, how do we know that they are not envying us for having other things they have not? Look at Daisy Curle," continued Beatrice, after a moment's hesitation; "I can't tell you how I envied her when I first knew her. All her talk was of Swiss mountains, and Italian cities, and Egypt, and Algiers—she seemed to lead the most enchanting life; and gradually I found that all she cared for wherever she went was to find out who were the 'Best people' in the place, and which was the best hotel to go to, and how to hit off its proper 'Season'. If she were not flying about all the time, she owned she was bored to death."

"Well, but Daisy! Daisy Curle!"

"Daisy is a very good specimen of a type. She is clever, extremely clever; and though she had only a few

years of education, it must have been a very good education; but she started straight away from school on a wandering, pleasure-seeking life—one which never threw her upon her own resources—and so she was always craving for excitement and 'Something doing' as she used to say. If poor Daisy could have been induced to stop at home and develop what was in her"—she paused and sighed—" but now I feel she will be worse than ever."

"I don't care if she is," said Gwen, recklessly. "Nasty, ungrateful little creature. We are well quit of her. And she would always have been a thorn in your flesh, Beatrice."

Beatrice nodded. The introduction of Daisy's name set her thinking again.

"Don't worry any more about her," proceeded Gwen, who herself was never known to worry about any mortal thing; "I hope she will tag on to those Fitzhuberts till they are sick to death of her, and cast her off just at some time when she particularly wants to cling on. I hope they will show her to her face that they only endured her for her money. I hope she will be sorry she ever knew them. Yes, I do;"—and the blue eyes glittered vindictively, so that Beatrice could not but smile at the unwonted sight.

"Still, I don't see why Daisy's being such a hopeless gad-about ought to reconcile us to never going anywhere," re-commenced the former, when both had laughed a little.

"I only took Daisy as an example, and because she came under my own eye. After I noticed it in her, I saw the same thing in others; then I began to think that all the luck was not on their side, if it made them so dependent on external influences, and so unable to do anything of themselves and for themselves. I do

think. Gwen," meditatively, "that much going aboutmuch, remember—has that effect."

"I should like to try if it has," quoth Gwen, smartly.

It was quite a feather in her cap when Beatrice spoke to her like this; in her placid way she had felt not a little hurt that during Daisy Curle's reign the latter had monopolised her sister, to her own entire exclusion from confidences which she did not always understand, but nevertheless enjoyed.

"Well, I must just hope for cousin Augusta," resumed she, now. "And I am glad you are more satisfied to let things go than you used to be, at any rate. Of course, as you say, this is our home"-looking round the noble, spacious apartment with a certain appreciation—"and I suppose if we have got to stick to it, we ought to be content." And she moved away.

"It is a blessed thing for everybody that she is more happy anyhow," reflected she, presently; "Beatrice used to make it so very disagreeable for the rest of us sometimes; and now she is much more gentle. She was always good-but goodness isn't everything in a house. And it is not as easy for her as it is for Kitty and me;"whereat the simple girl sighed a little and smiled a little, and went her way not without taking to heart in her own fashion the words that it had cost her sister an effort to speak.

"They're come!" announced Sir Henry, hurrying home with the news one afternoon, shortly after this. "I was passing that way, so I just took a look, and I saw the gate was open. Something had gone up; and old John, the roadman, said it was the luggage; and that another cartload was expected, and a carriage had driven in half-an-hour before. A nice cool day they have had for the journey:"-and he seated himself, and took off his cap complacently.

The weather had been very hot; and it would have been annoying for newcomers to suppose that August was always sultry in Somersetshire; wherefore he had rejoiced over Miss Kenyon's delay in taking up her abode at The Hollies, which delay brought it to almost the last day of the month ere the great event took place.

"How soon shall you call, my dear?" proceeded the speaker, fanning his brow with the discarded cap. "Hoo—hoo!—it is warm even to-day. Shall you drive down and call to-morrow?"

Certainly she would. Lady Laura had planned to a moment the exact and particular time at which warmth and eagerness of welcome could be combined with a regard for *les convenances* in her first appearance at the door of The Hollies; and Beatrice, while lending an ear to the preceding discussion, could not resist a secret vision of a quaintly clad little figure, discreetly stepping into the brougham after her ladyship had arranged herself within, and of Miss Adam's meek face at the window as she was being driven off with her back to the horses.

("I did offer her to sit by me if she felt uncomfortable—but she says she never does. And I fancy she is used to the other;" Lady Laura had observed on her return from the introductory drive—and thereafter the back-seat had been a matter of course.)

"How strange, how extraordinary if it is so!"—mused Beatrice often at this period. "Sometimes I think it cannot be; it must have been my fancy. But there was the wig; and the wig was all that was needed. Cousin Augusta sitting up in bed, with her hair combed back and without some of her teeth, was Miss Adam and no one else. There was the lisp when she spoke. Caused no doubt by the absence of that side-tooth. And though she did not actually mince her words—because that could be easily put on for the time—she spoke more like

Miss Adam than like cousin Augusta. How will she feel when mother walks in? Will she be able to make believe it is a strange face? And what did she do it for? That is what I want to know. . . .

"And that is what I mean to find out," resumed the speaker, with a look of resolution. "It was not done for no purpose, and it is not fair to us that she should keep that purpose to herself. It was not fair to us, whatever end she had in view; it was—still, I shall wait before I condemn—I who have so much to be sorry for in myself. I am not the right person to blame others. No. I shall wait—but I shall have it out with cousin Augusta yet." And with this in her mind, she turned on the present occasion, to listen to what was passing among the others.

Lady Laura was explaining with some circumlocution her reasons for making the proposed call without the accompaniment of any of her daughters.

"You would naturally wish to go with me," said she; "especially you, Beatrice and Gwen, considering all the kindness you have received,—but it is just on that account, and because you know your cousin, and I do not——"

"Of course," assented Beatrice, eagerly. "You will do much better without us." She had dreaded being asked to go.

"And as you tell me that girls do make calls by themselves nowadays," proceeded Lady Laura, who with difficulty could bring herself to believe this, but felt it might be turned to account if it were so, "you two could go together later in the day. I shall go early——" and she continued to dilate.

When she returned from the expedition she was full of it; alert and vivacious to a degree; and though there was little to narrate to auditors who had heard it all from the same source, when Lady Laura chose to talk, all were expected to listen.

The one thing of importance to Beatrice was that Major Everest, despite Sir Henry's inclusion of him in the arrival announcement, was not with his aunt, and was not expected till the 1st, the "Eve of St. Partridge".

She was thankful for the respite, and made the most of it; telling herself that the brisk intercourse, which was a sort of necessity between the two houses at the present moment, need not be maintained at such high pressure.

It would gradually glide into a permanent neighbourliness; and as no one knew better than cousin Augusta— (Miss Adam, that was)—all the outs and ins of life at Maynard Towers, she would understand without being told, that care must be taken by the young people not to encroach on their mother's rights in regard to her own especial friend and contemporary. She would not expect to see them oftener than was consistent with Lady Laura's ideas.

Everest was in Scotland, and loth to leave the moors, his aunt averred. He had, however, been a full month among them, having gone north the end of July, in order to get in some fishing before the grouse claimed his full attention.

"So that we are doing all we can to make him forget his woes," cried Miss Kenyon, blithely. "Of course, Sir Henry, you understand what it is to a man to have his career cut short, and be turned loose upon the world at thirty-five years of age. My nephew was so devoted to his profession that he would have stuck to it at all costs, if he could; but he had no choice; he could never command the regiment without being able to sit a horse; and riding is the one thing, I was going to say forbidden by the doctors, but it is not the doctors but his own knee-joint which is the real arbiter of fate. He hurt it once before, some years ago—and now it is done for. Well, he must make the best of it, and—"

"And, faith, the 'Best' is good enough," cried he. "What can a man want but to have done his duty, and have no more required of him? Many a poor fellow would envy Everest. There will be a few thousands home presently in his shoes, and without his prospects. What they are to do with themselves—but as for him!" And he looked with some heat at the person who could talk so foolishly.

"But to lead an idle life, Sir Henry."

"It needn't be idle. We'll find him work, work in plenty. I'm sure I never have an idle moment; what with Boards and Sessions—and now the County Council -to say nothing of looking after one's property-we country gentlemen are the hardest worked people going: it's the greatest mistake in the world to think of us as idlers."

"Houston must take pattern by you. I hope you will give him the benefit of your advice, and put him in the way of being useful."

"Anything I can do," replied he, mollified; and went home full of schemes.

The weather was fine, the partridges plentiful, and although it was understood that Major Everest was busy in the stubble, some days elapsed and no one saw anything of him during the first week of September.

Beatrice decided within herself that he would wait until Sunday to return her father's call, and, having arranged an engagement at the vicarage for that afternoon, felt easier in her mind.

Once, however, she had a fright; she was in the shrubbery, and saw a figure resembling that of Everest approaching,-but it turned out to be a new undergardener who was tall and slight-a younger man, and not in the least like the other on nearer view; she told herself not to be ridiculous.

On another occasion having returned from a ride (she meant to ride a good deal now, to Lady Laura's satisfaction, who approved of the exercise, and remarked that Beatrice looked particularly well in her habit)—she had dismounted, and was crossing the hall, when a footman with a tray of tea-cups hurried through from the servants' door. "Any one in the drawing-room, Thomas?"

"Mrs. Oldcastle and a party, miss. The carriage has gone round. Two other gentlemen have just gone in too, miss."

She had turned to walk along the corridor, but the last words arrested her steps, and Thomas, who was behind, proceeded communicatively, "Major Everest, I think it is, miss".

She might have been in love with him for the thump her heart gave! Of course she knew he would come, and he could not have come on a more lucky day—a party already in the drawing-room, and every one assembled; there would be talk, and bustle, eating and drinking, and all that went to make the meeting easy and commonplace—but that he should actually be there! For a minute she thought that she would not go in. No one would know she had returned, and she could slip upstairs, and say afterwards that she was tired and disinclined for company—but how if Lady Laura, who had a knack of inquiring where people were, should put the question aloud, and some one reply that she had been seen to ride up the avenue?

From the windows she could have been so seen, and Kitty had eyes like a hawk. Kitty would offer to fetch her. It would be dreadful to be fetched.

"No, I'll go of myself," said she, and stood looking vacantly about her.

She was now in a small side-room into which she had

turned to let Thomas pass. A mirror hung over the fireplace, and involuntarily—we repeat involuntarily she took a step towards it. We shall have very ill described Beatrice Maynard if it can be thought that she was a vain girl, but once before the sight of herself in the glass had been a revelation, and now she needed every aid to her courage, while perhaps there was a lurking anxiety—she must see how she looked?

And she looked her best, her royal best; a fine bloom upon her cheek, her eyes moist and melting. The slight disorder of her hair was more charming than any set arrangement, and its loose waves softened the severity of her plain felt riding-hat. She gathered up her skirt, and walked back into the corridor.

And now the door beyond opened, and from within came the hum of many voices.

She shrank before it. She must wait one moment, just one moment. Who would be nearest? Whom would she have to pass? Would she be able to slip in barely observed, or would they all stop talking and laughing and look at her? How foolish to care, butand just then Thomas emerging perceives who is outside, and relentlessly throws back the door he is about to close, and "Oh, here is Beatrice!" exclaims Kittv. from within.

No faltering nor hesitation now. Beatrice makes her stately entrance, to all appearance as easy and unembarrassed as though the eyes upon her were those of so many dumb creatures—and beneath that fine composure who would suspect trepidation or palpitation?

She makes straight for the fireside sofa. There is, of course, no fire; but the sofa is Lady Laura's dais, and by her side sits Mrs. Oldcastle, cup in hand, and her lap full of crumbs. "Been for a ride, my dear?"

Only for a second or two, however, can "My dear"

cast anchor in that safe and friendly port; she must sail forth again with graceful, gliding, imperceptible movements on her progress round the room.

Sally Oldcastle has to introduce her friends, two harmless nonentities; then there is Tony, who looks quite the old Tony in his weather-worn tweeds—no longer the very fine Tony in "Frocker and Topper" as when last seen. She is approaching Everest, and knows exactly where he stands—but Sir Henry, who is in conversation with the other gentleman from The Hollies, calls "Beatrice!"—and presents a soldierly-looking little fellow as Captain Yates, evidently rather intending his daughter to take Captain Yates off his hands.

She will, presently; but first a quiet "How d'ye do?" that no one notices or thinks about—and the great moment is over.

Gwen is talking to Major Everest; and Beatrice leaves them together, and throws herself into what is going forward among the other groups.

She has acquitted herself to admiration, and now all that is needed is to keep her attention from wandering while Captain Yates discusses Somersetshire, or the Misses Bowen Yorkshire. She does not want to know what topics Everest and her sister have in hand; she would never dream of listening, but if they will talk so loud—"What are you saying about me?" she cries, catching her own name.

"I hear you have discarded walking for riding," replies Everest, approaching her; and it is of no use, she must catch his eye, and feel or fancy that it only needed this slightest of silken threads to draw him to her side.

He regards her eagerly, interrogatively. Oh, well, she can talk, if that is all he wants; and here, in this roomful of people, there is nothing to fear. She allows

herself to be drawn into conversation, but embraces the opportunity for descanting upon the pleasure of gallops across country, and the virtues of her new bay mareand is so innocently unconscious of there being anything unfortunate in her choice of subject in the ears of a man who cannot now "sit a horse," that he wonders a It is not like a woman to be so devoid of tact.

At last the visit is over; and "I say, that eldest girl is a splendid looking creature!"-observes little Yates on the way home; and when Everest assents somewhat absently and does not pursue the topic, he thinks his own thoughts.

Future meetings are easy after this.

They are not very frequent; for the sportsmen are out most days on their own land, and there is a good deal going on to occupy the ladies in other ways, during the months which are always busy ones in country houses. Miss Kenyon dispenses hospitality at The Hollies-having down relays of people, some of whom are already known to the Maynard girls. She relies on their being asked up to play croquet and lawn tennis, and there are picnic-parties and luncheon-parties. Gwen and Kitty trot the younger visitors about in their pony-cart, while Beatrice offers mounts to the few who care to ride. Bicycles are not in favour; their day is over; but to Lady Laura's horror her cousin projects adding a motor car to her stable equipment, and every one is athirst for its arrival.

"My dear Augusta!"

"Oh yes, my dear Laura, one must march with the times, you know. Houston says we cannot get on without a motor; and he has been up to Town to see how ours is getting on, and is delighted with it. We shall have it by Wednesday."

"'Miss Adam' in a motor!" thinks Beatrice, with an inward spasm, as a ringletted face looks at her out of the window from the back-seat of the brougham.

She often ponders within herself how she is to break through the barrier which every day renders stronger. Break through she will; but there is something so impregnable in cousin Augusta, intrenched behind the publicity of her present existence, fortified by her relationship and long arrears of epistolatory intimacy, that watch as she may, Beatrice is tempted to relegate to time and chance the solution of the mystery. It can keep.

It even amuses her at times; she puzzles over it in secret, and pictures to herself what this one and that one would say if it came to light? Especially she loves to dwell on the discomfiture and amazement it would cause Everest.

He would be confounded beyond measure; and his face on learning that he himself had actually beheld the masquerade and spoken to the mask would be a sight to see.

"I suppose I must wait for the sight however," communed she with herself, as weeks went by and there was still no sign that her curiosity was likely to be satisfied. . . .

What seems a long period as it passes, is often but a speck to look back upon; wherefore it is not wonderful that there came a day at last when all the previous waiting time went for nothing, and patience had her reward—such as it was.

Beatrice had strolled by herself to the seat in the woods which had been used by Everest and his aunt as their place of rendezvous—and she was brushing the leaves from the rustic bench preparatory to seating herself, when her eye fell upon a glittering object.

A second glance revealed this as a small diamond brooch whose loss Miss Adam had bewailed, and which had been hunted for high and low in vain.

With an exclamation she pounced upon it, recalling how much distress and vexation Miss Adam had confessed to, and how indifferent she must in reality have been, did there not attach to the ornament some peculiar value. As a poor woman, with but few trinkets and none of consequence, the regret was natural; but surely the loss of a small addition to her toilette need not have occasioned so much consternation within the breast of a rich lady whose jewel-box overflowed; unless—she hastily examined the brooch.

And it was as she thought. Upon the back three initial letters were engraven which would have been confusing in the extreme to Lady Laura's companion had they been brought beneath the notice of her patroness. A. E. K. scarcely applied to Emma Adam. A. E. K. in the hands of Beatrice Maynard was a weapon as powerful as the invincible sword of a magician. She looked and looked again; finally she sat down upon the bench.

All previous speculations sank into insignificance before a discovery which rendered them speculations no longer.

She held in her hand the proof, and armed with the proof she presented herself the next day at The Hollies.

"Oh, Beatrice!"

"So glad to see you," continued Miss Kenyon, cheerfully; "I am all alone and dull. I am not often dull, am I? But this cloudy February sky, and the dripping laurels"—pointing down her drive—"do tell a little upon nerves not country-bred. You look brisk enough; and I shall brisk up too under your influence." And she sank conversationally into the depths of an easy chair.

"Cousin Augusta?"

Now that the crucial moment had come Beatrice would not flinch; but she found her lips trembling, and the voice that issued from them sounded forced and strained in her ears.

- "I have found something," she murmured, and put her hand in her pocket.
- "Found something, my dear?" Miss Kenyon glanced carelessly at the small packet held towards her, for she had entirely forgotten the circumstance of her loss—"and what may this be?" proceeded she, unrolling the paper in which a cardboard box was wrapped.
 - "You know. For it-is yours."
 - " Mine?"

But the next moment a flood of colour suffused the speaker's cheeks, and the diamond brooch fell with a snap to the floor. Miss Kenyon looked as if she had seen a ghost.

"We searched for it everywhere after—you left," resumed Beatrice, averting her eyes, "but I only found it yesterday, and no one else knows that it has been found at all. Cousin Augusta, I came here alone to-day to ask you, to beg of you to tell me—only me—and because I have suspected this—almost, but not quite, been sure of it for a long time—I want you to tell me, why?" She paused in agitation not to be controlled, the while an imploring eye was raised, beneath which the other's fell.

"Why did you do it?" Suddenly Beatrice rose, and threw herself on her knees beside her cousin's chair. "It was not right, it was not fair, nor honourable—and some reason you must have had for thus deceiving us all. Dear cousin, I can't bear to speak like this; and I have waited and waited—but I must know. You must tell me. It was so strange, almost cruel of you. My poor mother—"

"Never tell her, Beatrice,"-a sharp cry of pain.

"I think it would break her heart; she thinks so much of you, and trusts and believes in you so implicitly. That you should have been a sort of spy in our household——"

"No, no; oh, no. Oh, not that, Beatrice. Never that, dear Beatrice."

The speaker quailed,—but with something of an awful majesty upon her brow the stern young monitress proceeded.

"You were taken into the confidence of each one. You saw us as we are among ourselves. You heard our family talk; and sometimes it was of yourself——"

"I know, I know."

"Did you never realise what you were doing? That you were prying into the very heart of our family life? That we laid it fearlessly bare before a harmless unknown, a humble creature before whom anything could be said—and that you, with your knowledge and your insight behind the scenes, were doing us a great wrong? You used to talk with me—"

"And by so doing learnt to love you. Beatrice, whoever lost, and I am not prepared to say that any one lost by this, you gained. I should never have known the beauty, the strength of your character, but for the folly and weakness of my own."

"May I speak now?" continued Miss Kenyon, after a pause of some minutes' duration, during which Beatrice had been silently struggling with emotions which threatened to overmaster her.

Upon receiving a motion of assent: "I do not intend to extenuate myself," proceeded the elder lady, who was also visibly agitated, though she endeavoured to speak with calmness, "but the light in which you view what was only intended as an easy method of accomplishing a laudable purpose had, I solemnly assure you, never occurred to me at the time I planned to play the trick which was, as you say, disgraceful to myself and dishonourable to every one else. I see it now to be so. I did not see it before—although I have never thought of the affair without a sense of shame and repugnance."

Beatrice bent her head in silence. ("But I will know why?"—thought she to herself.)

"I had a twofold object in view," proceeded Miss Kenyon, and hesitated. "My dear," she recommenced suddenly, "have you any conception of what it is to live alone? Not merely to have that individual existence which many people have, who have none to whom they can confide their innermost thoughts—but to have no one with whom to discuss the affairs of others in whom they take a deep and vital interest? If I, at the time we speak of, had possessed any friend sufficiently intimate to take counsel with. I should never have committed the unpardonable folly we both deplore; but Iwell, things seem so different when one looks at them all by oneself, and there is no voice to dissuade—no kindly, wise, plain-spoken person at hand to put a hand upon the rein. I was in trouble, and shall I tell you about whom? You know without my telling; Houston Everest is my dead sister's only son, and he is very dear to me, while yet I have no control over him, and until recently little influence with him. We only saw each other at long intervals. Houston, I learned, was notnot---"

"Do not tell me anything you would rather not;" Beatrice was now composed, and her tone was cold and formal. "You knew he was in this neighbourhood, and desired to meet him without his recognising you, I suppose?" The explanation seemed grossly inadequate, but she ventured upon it at hazard.

"Not precisely that;" Miss Kenyon moved uneasily in her chair. "The truth is best. I wished not merely to find out what my nephew was about, but to warn him against a certain person."

"It was from you he learned what he did? Then you must have revealed yourself to him?"

A pause, then—"I did," said Miss Kenyon, briefly.

"And the warning missed fire? It only"—Beatrice flushed, "it did the very thing it was meant to prevent?"

"You are right. Houston has a chivalrous nature; he was simply infuriated—as I might have known he would be. Had I let him alone he would never have given two thoughts to Daisy Curle; as it was, he like an idiot went to you?"—she stopped with a note of interrogation in her voice.

"Yes, he spoke to me; told me her story, and asked me to stand by her if it came out. There was no harm in his doing that," said Beatrice, in a cold, clear voice, "and I granted his request, of course. You know how I fulfilled my promise; but all this does not affect one point I must have cleared up"—and she looked steadily in her cousin's face. "What had we to do with the matter? It lay between you and Major Everest? Why was it necessary to drag us in? You seem to have gone to work in such a roundabout way when there was an absolutely straight path before you that I—I own I still cannot understand it,"—with emphasis.

Miss Kenyon rose and placed a screen between her and the fire. "Shall I—dare I tell her?" deliberated she. Prudence cried "No. A thousand times, no;" but there was a compelling and almost threatening intonation in the speaker's voice, and she shook in her shoes. "The harm is done already," reflected she swiftly. "And Beatrice is so masterful, as her mother says. Really Laura has more right on her side than I used to give her credit for." Aloud, "My difficulty, dear Beatrice, lies in my fear of offending your delicate, sensitive nature".

"Mine!"

"Yes, yours. I had heard so much of you all, and conceived so high a conception of what my cousin Laura's girls must be like, that I—cannot you guess?"

"Guess?"

"And you, when I came to know you," continued Miss Kenyon, taking her hand—but Beatrice threw away the hand, and rose to her feet, towering over her companion.

"I see, I understand. Oh, yes, I understand. You fixed upon me as the bait to lure back your black sheep to the fold. Perhaps you recommended me to him, enumerated my virtues, and——"

"Beatrice, stop. You will say something you will repent of all your life. You are under a misapprehension; believe me, you are. Major Everest——" but while Beatrice, beside herself with passion, scarcely heard a syllable of the above, the name of Everest made her tremulous lips again fly apart.

"I wonder you can name him to me," she cried; "this folly, this degradation—he, then, is mixed up with it? Major Everest——"the door opened, and Everest himself walked in.

CHAPTER XII.

CONCLUSION.

How she got out of the house, Beatrice never knew.

She had a confused remembrance of an easy greeting, and a friendly, unconscious face; then of a change upon that face, a swift transition to bewilderment merging into consternation; finally of deep gravity overspreading every feature.

What she said, or what any one else said, during that hurried leave-taking she could never afterwards recall; it was over in a moment,—and the next moment, as it seemed, she was hurrying down the carriage drive as though pursued by demons.

At last she had probed to its depths the whole ignoble mystery. Not only had Everest never thought of her, never cared for her, but she had been offered to him and declined by him. Alone among the silent woods, the poor girl burst into an agony of crying.

For she knew that she had suspected this for some time past. Again and again she had put away the thought, finding it too intolerable to be borne; but every endearing expression on her cousin's part, every caress and look of love, brought it back with renewed persistency; and once a gay remark of Lady Laura's, intended to give pleasure, was met in a manner that struck the speaker dumb.

What had she said to call forth that look of mingled anger and pain? What could Beatrice find to resent in the fact that she was her cousin's acknowledged favourite? It was incomprehensible.

With flowing tears, Beatrice saw it all now, while even this was not the worst. Everest indifferent towards herself was—could she say it? could she own it? spontaneously bestowing those affections, solicited in vain on her behalf, upon another! He liked—Gwen! . Ever since his taking up his residence in the neighbourhood, she had foreshadowed this.

At first it was but a fancy. Pretty Gwen, with her ready smiles and little play of coquetry whenever a man was by, had not only a natural inclination to chat and laugh with Major Everest now that he was, as she said, "Nobody's man," but immensely applauded herself whenever, by so doing, she could distract his attention from her sister.

Afterwards she would demand gratitude from Beatrice. "I took him off you, didn't I? He was preparing to bore you as usual, just because he thinks he must be civil to the eldest, but I made him talk to me. I don't mind him—and you do."

"Yes, thank you, dear," said Beatrice, somewhat hurriedly. Gwen, feeling herself encouraged, would prattle more gaily and persistently than before at the next meeting.

Beatrice, on the other hand, drew back and back.

If she saw Everest on the road or in the village, swift as thought she would dart up a lane, or through an entry; if she heard he was in the drawing-room, she would either not go in at all, or intrench herself in some unapproachable quarter—by her mother's side for choice, a spot not affected by the young people.

She was perfectly civil to Major Everest. "But you do hold him at arm's length," said Gwen. "If I were you I shouldn't show quite so plainly—however, he sees nothing." And she and Kitty made fun with their friend, and agreed that it was a decided improvement

on old times having him drop in at odd hours, bringing now and again a companion, or, if alone, at any rate a fresh element.

Sometimes he would be the bearer of an invitation from his aunt; and Lady Laura did not, as formerly, throw cold water on little impromptu propositions, emanating as they now did from a proper and desirable person. She was anxious to show that no one could be more amiable and sociable when the right people did the right thing,—so that meetings grew more and more frequent as the months passed, a kind of dignified hilarity permeating the whole atmosphere.

Every one seemed brisker. Sir Henry in confab with his daughters would rub his hands over the reward his wife's perseverance in the epistolary line had brought her. "I never could have believed anything so good would come of all those letters," averred he. "'Pon my word, I used to wonder what she would do if anything happened to put a stop to them?—but this is better still. Your mother is never at a loss, with The Hollies to go to; and as for you girls, you have her to thank for all this coming and going."

Gwen laughingly acknowledged the obligation; and whereas formerly The Hollies had been her sister's special and particular haunt, it was she who now betook herself thither two or three times for once that Beatrice did.

And Gwen was in great good looks at this time. The constant variety and occupation afforded by having a lively household established close at hand, with permissible share in its doings, banished repinings, and she no longer hankered after a wider sphere of action. In consequence, she showed to every advantage—while Beatrice was conscious of being unwittingly thrown into the shade. Was not a contrast inevitable?

Yet oh, it wrung her heart. It seemed so cruel, so

unnecessary. There were so many others with whom Gwen would have been just as well pleased, and whom she, with her gentle, adaptable nature, would have equally suited.

She was innocent, innocent as the day, of stealing her sister's lover. Had not Beatrice herself declared, and that in language the most positive and conclusive, that Everest, whatever he might once have been, was now nothing and never would be anything to her? Had not Beatrice herself believed herself when so speaking? How should poor simple Gwen know better?

Nor should she ever know. The scene from which her wretched sister was flying, never to be forgotten though it was, could still be outwardly effaced; an apology could be made, and Everest led to suppose that the detection of his aunt's identity with the personage who had lived for some months beneath the Maynards' roof, disguised as an underling, had so startled and shocked the discoverer that she was unaccountable for what she said and did—and there it would end.

He must be cautioned through Miss Kenyon not to broach the subject to her.

Miss Kenyon owed her that reparation; and painful as it would be to have to demand it—odious as an interview with this for its object must be—she would go through with it for every one's sake. It would never do to leave matters as they were.

Pride, resolution, and plain common-sense all came to her aid, and yet she found herself crying. She could not stop.

Above there was a moaning February sky, and a low wind whistling monotonously over the land, which was out in flood, for there had been heavy rains for some days past.

As Beatrice emerged from the woods, she found herself

in a meadow through which a stream, usually quiescent, now brawled along, foaming and uproarious; and she mechanically extended her walk towards a spot where it was bridged by a plank, when too high to be crossed as at other times by stepping-stones.

The torrent was now so swollen that she perceived it might be difficult to cross at all—but if so, she would return as she came, there being still an hour or two of daylight before her.

She wandered on mechanically; now wiping her eyes, anon letting them overflow her burning cheeks, fearless of interruption; for within her father's precincts privacy was carefully maintained, and the ladies of Sir Henry's family could walk at will without fear of intrusion. The meadow was one to which they often resorted in the spring time, in order to cull the yellow mallows which covered the banks of the streamlet—while at other seasons of the year there was an old woman to visit at the forester's lodge, a pretty little domain at the farther end.

It occurred to Beatrice that she might now look in for a few minutes on Nanny White, and thus provide herself with an excuse for being late, should her prolonged absence be commented upon.

A few pattering drops of rain, however, and a glance at the sky, which was now portentously overclouded, warned her not to delay; and indeed so ominous was the aspect of things, that presently she paused to deliberate whether it might not be as well to abandon the above intention and retrace her steps at once.

But there was the plank; and by crossing the plank the distance between her and home would be much lessened. The rain continued to drop, not fast, but heavily; she elected to proceed to the spot, and decide there upon her further movements.

Never had she seen the brook fuller; yet, to judge by the state of the banks, it must have been fuller still in the night. They were sodden, and in several places the soft earth had caked away, and large pieces of grassy mould, semi-detached, hung over the water or swirled along with the current.

She looked eagerly for the plank, which might also have been carried down stream—but it was there; and, though only a few inches above the surface, she need not heed this, nor yet its being wet and slippery, since a handrail was provided in view of contingencies like the present. She hurried forward, not sorry to have her thoughts distracted for the moment, and was about to place her foot upon the rustic gangway when she suddenly hesitated to proceed. Its end was not in the usual place.

It had shifted with the yielding of the bank, and was now aslant the stream, instead of lying straight across. "Still, there can be no danger," cogitated she.

Besides, if she felt it give, she could draw back; she need not be foolhardy—and she ventured a foot.

Scarcely, however, had she done so than a loud shout, proceeding as it seemed from some one close behind, made her start so violently as nearly to effect the very catastrophe it was raised to avert.

A human presence, and she had seen no one! Her first feeling was one of anger at the intrusion, coupled with a not unnatural feeling that if she were intended to be warned against the crossing, she should not have been suffered to wait till the warning itself constituted a danger. She turned indignantly.

But indignation gave place to another emotion when she saw, not Giles, the forester, nor any of the other woodmen, but a figure no less familiar, and far more distasteful. Distasteful? It was horrible. What was Everest doing here? How dared he presume—and was she going to obey him?

She set her teeth, and with a disdainful gesture made a second, and this time an incautious and rapid descent. The plank sank instantly.

She felt it do so; but now her whole weight was upon it, and she seized the handrail, Everest being but a yard or two off.

If only it would slip hold before he reached it, and bear her from him!

Kind, friendly plank—down, down it goes—and she is on it, and he is not! A splash, a cry from behind—her own name rings out in wild entreaty "Beatrice!"—but Beatrice smiles, a bitter, satisfied smile; what is all this din about?

She looks round to wave a gay adieu, but the next instant has to grasp the rail with both hands, and her skirt is floating on the water, and the frail bridge is swaying, swinging. "Let go," shrieks Everest, springing to her side.

She feels herself seized; yet still madly unyielding she will go on, and he shall not prevent her.

His imploring voice is in her ears, and she is enraged that it is there; come what may, he shall not drag her back;—but struggle is vain, he has her fast in a grip that only death itself could loosen.

And now the cold flood is about her feet and the plank is gone.

With a supreme effort, Everest keeps his footing, though the water is up to his waist, and its force is strong; but the depth near the bank is not that of midstream, and there is a solid piece of pebbly shore beneath.

"One moment, dearest!" His arms are locked around

her, his lips are close; and she hears, she hears the last word distinctly. A light leaps into her eyes.

But it fades as he staggers against the foaming current without again breaking silence. Will she aid him? No. It is by his own strength alone that eventually both are safe upon the bank, and no sooner does Beatrice realise this than her heart hardens afresh. To do her justice, she is scarce conscious of what has passed, nor of the imminence of her recent peril. One thought alone fills her heart.

"You here?"

For all reply he gazes at her; he cannot speak.

"This was your doing," continues she, panting and breathless. "If it had not been for you——" but though she awaits disclaimer there is none. He still gazes into her face as though devouring every feature, and with what a strange expression!

"How came you here?" demanded she.

" I followed you."

"Followed me? By what right? I refused your company, and to force it upon me—it was seeing you that made me——" suddenly she put her hand to her head, and the passionate utterances died away. She reeled and looked blindly round for support, but the meadow was bare.

"Lean on me," said Everest, in a low voice, and made as though he would uphold her, but she recoiled from his touch.

"Lean on me," repeated he, peremptorily. "There is nothing else—ah!"—and as she sank slowly and heavily into his arms he scarcely knew what to feel of joy or fear.

But what was to be done? They were alone in a secluded spot, and it was vain to hope for assistance of any kind. Unaided he must endeavour to restore the

inanimate form, and bring back life and colour to the pale face, so dear, so lovely, so strangely cruel to him as it had been that day. Baffled and repulsed, he had yet seen something in that one unguarded moment when his own unguarded word sprang from him, which made amends for all. All that had gone before of suspense and doubt and tremulous unbelief must now and forever be set at rest if only—she slowly unclosed her eyes.

"Can you rise?" said Everest, softly. "The ground is so wet, and you—I fear you must exert yourself. Can you?"—with a look of tender anxiety. "Then let me help,"—and he placed his hand beneath her elbow as she struggled to her feet. "Now, if we could reach that cottage," proceeded he, glancing towards the woodman's hut before mentioned, "you might at least shelter there, and I could leave you and send something—"

"Yes-yes!" She caught at the words "Leave you".

"Can you walk?" said he, bending towards her. "You are still trembling;"—but she turned her head away, and there was no response either to look or question.

"Take my arm."

"Thank you, I do not need it." A proud gesture accompanied the words. She tottered forward a few steps, then stopped and looked at him appealingly, upon which he again proffered the rejected assistance, and, albeit yielding to necessity alone, he felt her lean more and more heavily as the advance progressed.

Her soaked skirts clinging round her feet and ankles impeded progress which would have been slow enough at any rate; and so chill felt the air, and so steadily fell the dropping rain, that though it never actually broke into the storm which threatened, Everest's whole thoughts were for the moment concentrated on reaching a haven of refuge, and he made no attempt at any renewal of conversation till they stood before the cottage door.

"Here is a fire, at least," exclaimed he, then; joyfully indicating a glow of red which shone upon the little casement. "If you can get dry and warm—perhaps, if there are women about, you might borrow some clothes? I do hope, I do trust you will take no harm." And with the relaxing of tension there was again a dangerous softness of tone, and tender, more than tender anxiety of look.

She murmured something, anything—and, lifting the latch to which she was accustomed, looked hastily round in the firelight. A ruddy glow from a huge bed of coals was diffused over every nook, but the little kitchen was empty, and silence prevailed everywhere.

"Where can she be?" ejaculated Beatrice, who had counted on the old woman's presence and protection. "Nanny?" she called up the little staircase, but no reply came.

"Had you better not dry your clothes?" said Everest, quietly. Yet for all his quietness there was a gleam of triumph in his eyes. At last—at last.

The storm was coming on apace, and as he spoke a sharp blast of hail spattered against the window, followed by a flash of lightning. The little hut would be doubly secure against intruders now.

"She must have gone out to see her daughter," said Beatrice, trying to be calm, "and feared to return till this was over. Probably Nanny saw it coming, though we did not."

"We were just in time," assented he, and drew closer to the welcome warmth a worn arm-chair, looking to her as he did so.

She sat down—for what else could she do?—and after a moment's hesitation he knelt by her side, and busied himself in gathering together some fallen logs which, still blazing, had fallen on the hearth. These he picked up one by one, and replaced, so that a spurt of flame was now added to the fiery glow. Otherwise the little room would have been dark, for there was no light to be obtained from outside.

Beatrice shivered, and spread her hands to catch the warmth. Her wet skirts made a pool upon the floor.

Yet it was not of this either was thinking, and again the lightning played and the thunder pealed, and still the elements were unheeded.

At length, unable to endure the strain, she started up and walked to the window; she could sit still no longer with that mute figure kneeling by her side.

And she had noticed something, a little extraneous thing, which it was odd to notice at such a moment, yet it touched her. She saw for the first time that there were grey hairs stealing in among the dark brown all over Everest's head.

They surprised her, and what had they to do with her? Yet he had called her "Dearest!"

She stood, her back towards him, gazing into vacancy; and though there was no sound, she presently knew that he had risen, and was there—there, all but touching her, and breathing, as she did, with long-drawn breaths. It was coming. It? What?

"Am I never to speak?"

A sort of stupor fell upon her. Was this Everest, the Everest who had spoken so easily and readily when there was nothing to say? And was he going again—no, not again—she turned with swift resolution to face and frown him down—but her own eyes fell, no power on earth would do that now.

"You know—you must, you do know—what you refuse to hear," proceeded he. "In that dreadful moment when your danger—I could not help it, a word escaped me— Beatrice, can you say you did not understand? Say I am presumptuous; say I am unworthy; but confess you know that I love you——"

"No! no!"

She thought she cried out, but it was a soundless whisper only just audible, which he had to hold his breath to catch.

"I said 'Dearest'"—he leaned over her. "I said what was in my heart. You are, you have been for long the dearest——"

"No, I tell you, no." But he caught the sound of a low sob, and her head fell upon her breast.

"Beatrice!" What a world of love and longing, reproach and agonising entreaty was there in that solitary word!

And though she knows it not, the tears are running down her face; and of what avail are words, with these traitors giving every struggling syllable the lie? The next minute she is in his arms, his kisses on her cheek—and within that little lonely room, with a tumult raging outside, there falls a sudden hush.

Presently they are by the fire again, and still holding her in his close embrace, Everest pours forth the pent-up torrents in ears that are now only too ready to listen.

All seems so simple, as it always does—in the retrospect. True, he said a little more than was absolutely the case; for what lover could be strictly accurate at such a moment?—and if it seemed to this one that he spoke but the truth when he exclaimed again and again that from the first meeting there had been a feeling within his bosom which he had had to combat and beat down—that it had never wholly been overcome, and had sprung to life again with renewed and overwhelming force the instant the two again met—and that all her cold avoidance and many repulses could neither eradicate it, nor

lead him to believe hope was vain—who shall blame him?

"Sometimes I almost did despair," he says. "But then it always seemed that just after you had been most forbidding some little thing would throw you off your guard, and let me see, or fancy—in short, I felt, though why I could not tell, but I felt it was a 'Guard'. You could not always command your looks, Beatrice; however proud and cold your speech."

"I did-did try."

"I think you let me see you were afraid of yourself. You escaped, instead of giving battle. A soldier knows what that means,"

"Ought I to have--"

"Oh, no," said he, with a happy laugh, "not at all. You ought to have done just what you did. You tantalised me beyond endurance."

"Indeed, indeed I did not think of that. Oh, it is all so strange, so wonderful"—and again she hid her face upon his breast, seeking even now to conceal the tell-tale light within her eyes.

At last the storm has spent its fury, and a palegleam from the sun's last setting rays overspreads the world without. There is a gap in the clouds; but it may be only a brief one, and "February-fill-dyke" be at work again directly.

"Must we go?" said Everest, regretfully. "I suppose we must, and yet I feel so selfish, I should like to keep you here forever. Beatrice,"—he took her hand and gazed into her eyes, "shall I tell you something more, something besides all I have said already? It is this: before I had any other feeling for you, I trusted you. I had faith in you. I knew that you were to be believed in; that you were true, that you were good. A man

should thank God," he bent his head reverently, "when he can say that of the woman he loves."

"I think we really ought to go now," said Beatrice, for the second or third time.

She was always rising, and he as persistently constraining her to sit down again—but now she was not to be overpersuaded. "It will be dark directly; and though they will have guessed that the storm prevented my returning sooner—"

"Thrice blessed storm," interposed he, gaily. "Come, then. We will make the rain, and the hail, and the thunder and the lightning, our excuse until—but I think we may as well own the whole truth while we are about it, dear? Let us go in." And they threaded their way homewards in the kindly dusk, their dimly outlined figures seeming but one, had any eyes been on the outlook to perceive—but it was only old Nanny who hobbled past presently, too intent upon picking her own way to have any curiosity about that of others.

Before the walk was over, there was one final matter to be adjusted. "My poor aunt," said Everest, tentatively. "What about her, Beatrice? You were not quite friends when you parted this afternoon; and perhaps what I said after you were gone hardly tended to make her less unhappy. She confessed to me—or rather I wrung from her—what had happened, before I set off in pursuit of you. I guessed which way you would go. A few hot words I know I said at first, and left her miserable. Yet she meant well. She loves us both, can we—what do you think?—forgive her?"

Beatrice smiled. Forgiveness? She raised her eyes to his, and murmured something he could not catch.

"What, dear?"

"It is only some lines I often think of, but it never

seemed till now as if I knew their full meaning;" and she repeated softly,

"Forgive, for it is sweet to stammer one letter of the Eternal's language, On earth it is called Forgiveness."

He pressed her hand to his side, and said no more.

"Oh, Beatrice!"

Gwen was the speaker, and, to her sister's relief and joy, the ejaculation was uttered in accents of the purest delight.

It now appeared that Gwen had never been deceived for a moment by Everest's attitude as regarded herself. She owned that, thinking him fancy-free, she had felt at liberty to talk and jest; but protested vigorously that she had always known that if any one could have attracted him, it would have been Beatrice—and that his seeming insensibility in that quarter was evidence conclusive of his bachelor predilections.

"I made the most of what there was to be had of him, and a good thing I did, for it is little enough I shall get now," laughed she. "And there is Tony Oldcastle fighting and quarrelling with Kitty worse than ever, and any one can see how that will end—so I shall be left all alone at home one of these days; which is really too bad, considering that I was the one who always said I would put up with any ordinary sort of husband who was agreeable to the family."

"Dear Gwen, you shan't be thrown away on 'Any ordinary sort of husband'."

"So it appears. There is none on the horizon, at any rate. And just as well there isn't," considered she, after a pause. "It would be a pretty state of things if, after remaining quiescent all these years, we should suddenly all three fly off. What would the poor parent birds do?"

Never were poor parent birds more rejoiced neverthe-

less than were Sir Henry and Lady Laura Maynard on the present occasion.

To have a marriage, a real marriage, in the family, with their eldest and most important daughter for the bride, was in itself an intense if secret satisfaction to both. They could not have countenanced a match below the dignity of Miss Maynard, the descendant of a long line of Maynards, and future possessor of their estates; and of suitable as well as unsuitable offers Beatrice had made short work hitherto. It had seemed as if she were quite likely not to wed at all.

But now, not only could they give a ready consent to an alliance every way desirable, but their hearts were genuinely touched by their daughter's happiness.

To have her established in her own neighbourhood—near, yet not too near—to be able still to consult her and confide in her, while yet no longer secretly worried by her incomprehensible aspirations and efforts after the unattainable—was a ceaseless source of complacency; and that the marriage should unite herself and her dear cousin Augusta in a new bond was, in Lady Laura's eyes, the crowning bliss of all.

It was agreed between the three who knew of cousin Augusta's whimsical escapade, that it should remain their secret. Everest and Beatrice saw that she was thoroughly ashamed of having ever played so foolish a part, and severally and together assured her that it should be buried in oblivion.

"Only," appended the latter on one occasion when alone with her cousin, and both were in the best of humours, "only, do let me just once see you as you appeared that first day at Maynard Towers. You have the wig——"

"My dear, I have nothing of the kind. I burnt it,—never shall I forget how hard it was to burn, and how

dreadfully I was afraid that the smell would not be got rid of before some one came into the room—and I gave away the clothes. I put them up in a bundle, and took them to the workhouse."

"The only thing I could do, I shall not do," continued the lively lady, tapping her lips merrily. "No, not even for you, Beatrice. I was so uncomfortable and looked so hideous without them—them, you know. No, you shall never see 'Miss Adam' again. You must try to forget that she ever existed"—which promise, faute de mieux, was now given.

Miss Kenyon owned that she was too old and too much of a traveller and wanderer to take kindly to country life as a whole. She did not go so far as to add that she had only bought The Hollies with a view to the end so happily attained—but there was never the slightest question of her vacating her present abode in favour of her nephew and his bride, nor of her readiness to establish herself in London as a permanent place of residence, with occasional flights to other favoured spots.

She winked to Kitty as she announced this.

It was well for Lady Laura's feelings that she did not see the wink. She could still hold up "Your cousin Augusta" as a model of decorum.

Of Daisy Curle rumours reached Somersetshire from time to time; and these were always lapped up with glee by Tony Oldcastle in particular, who made a point of retailing them from house to house. His favourite formula was "Do you remember that awful dinner-party of mine?"—and he never ceased to consider himself the hero of the piece, though always lamenting that Miss Constantia Gibbs did not see the face he made at her from behind the door.

"She has never got a second look in, though," chuckled he; "I know, for I have kept a watch upon her. I know some people who know the Curles, and I asked them to tell me how things went on—and it appears Miss Longlegs Gibbs once tried it on with the Fitzhubert set, and they none of them cared a hang! Not quite. She had gone to the wrong shop that time. They were far too up-to-date. We are so beastly old-fashioned down here, that Long Con scored with us—(Kitty says she would have given anything to have been there)—but Daisy Curle can snap her fingers at California now. I am glad she cleared out, however," continued Tony, reflectively. "She was a sham concern, if she was nothing else; and she won't improve by keeping. She had her chance, and threw it away. She'll go from bad to worse now."

When Beatrice heard this, she looked as she felt, grave.

But her conscience acquitted her; Everest consoled her; and between the two she could not long dwell upon a retrospect which always gave her some degree of pain.

Yet she would not grudge the pain; through it she had learned too much.

She had learned to know something of her own inmost self, and perhaps also something of the hidden workings of the minds of others. There are times when it does not need a great trial, but only a small and humbling experience to purify and ennoble natures like that of Beatrice Maynard.

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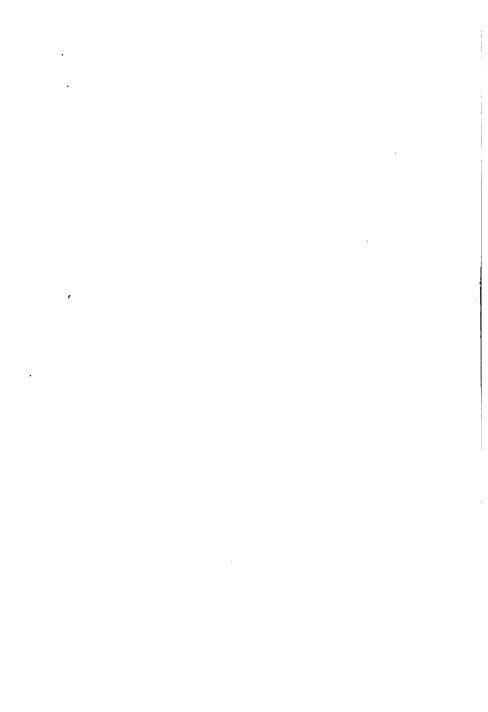
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